

READY, WILLING, AND ABLE TO WORK: HOW
SMALL BUSINESSES EMPOWER PEOPLE WITH
DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

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CONTENTS

OPENING STATEMENTS

Hon. Steve Chabot	Page 1
Hon. Nydia Velázquez	2

WITNESSES

Ms. Angela Timashenka Geiger, President and CEO, Autism Speaks, Washington, DC	4
Mr. Dave Friedman, Founder and CEO, AutonomyWorks, Downers Grove, IL	5
Mr. John Cronin, Co-Founder and Chief Happiness Officer, John's Crazy Socks, Melville, NY, accompanied by Mr. Mark X. Cronin, Co-Founder and President, John's Crazy Socks	7
Ms. Lori Ireland, President, Extraordinary Ventures, Vice Chair Autism Society of America, Chapel Hill, NC	9

APPENDIX

Prepared Statements:	
Ms. Angela Timashenka Geiger, President and CEO, Autism Speaks, Washington, DC	22
Mr. Dave Friedman, Founder and CEO, AutonomyWorks, Downers Grove, IL	32
Mr. John Cronin, Co-Founder and Chief Happiness Officer, John's Crazy Socks, Melville, NY, accompanied by Mr. Mark X. Cronin, Co-Founder and President, John's Crazy Socks	39
Ms. Lori Ireland, President, Extraordinary Ventures, Vice Chair Autism Society of America, Chapel Hill, NC	47
Questions and Answers for the Record:	
Questions from Hon. Brad Schneider to Mr. Dave Friedman and Answers from Mr. Dave Friedman	53
Additional Material for the Record:	
Statement from Rep. Adriano Espaillat	57

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WEDNESDAY, MAY 9, 2018

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
COMMITTEE ON SMALL BUSINESS,

Washington, DC.

The Committee met, pursuant to call, at 11:00 a.m., in Room 2360, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Steve Chabot [chairman of the Committee] presiding.

Present: Representatives Chabot, Brat, Radewagen, Blum, Comer, Fitzpatrick, Marshall, Norman, Curtis, Velázquez, Evans, and Schneider.

Chairman CHABOT. Good morning. I call this hearing to order. I want to thank everyone for being with us. I am Steve Chabot, Chair of the Committee and Nydia Velázquez, the Ranking Member. Last Friday, the Department of Labor reported that the non-farm unemployment rate is a little under 4 percent, 3.9 to be exact, the lowest rate in nearly 2 decades. The last time the unemployment rate remained below 4 percent for a sustained period was the late 1960's. April also marked the 91st consecutive month of job gains, the longest streak of monthly increases on record.

While this is great news for America, here at the Small Business Committee, we continue to hear from small businesses about a consequence of historically low unemployment and that is the lack of qualified applicants or the skills gap. During times of economic prosperity, small businesses often find it more difficult to compete with large companies in attracting qualified candidates leaving some jobs unfilled.

One segment of American society that is often overlooked when discussing economic opportunities through new job growth is the special needs community which brings us to the topic of today's hearing.

About two years ago, this Committee held a hearing about small business opportunities for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. While employment and labor force participation rates for the disabled population have increased since then, there are still many individuals who want to obtain meaningful and sustaining employment. Given the innovation, flexibility and diversity of small businesses, they can offer inclusive environments for employees with developmental disabilities and fill jobs vital to operating and expanding their businesses.

Today, we are highlighting small business and entrepreneurs who are successfully creating jobs and providing opportunities for individuals with developmental disabilities. We will also hear from advocates who are continuing to raise awareness to small business employers that these individuals are ready, willing and able to work.

I appreciate the witnesses being here today and if I ever stop talking we will get to them. And I look forward to hearing their testimony as I am sure we are all do. And I would now like to yield to the Ranking Member, for her opening remarks.

Ms. VELAZQUEZ. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. For most people, work is closely aligned with feelings of self-worth, independence, and a general sense that one is contributing to society. Generally, when small businesses are succeeding, the result is greater employment opportunity for all Americans. Small businesses open doors and create jobs in their communities by helping people earn a living doing the things that they are most passionate about.

Unfortunately, one particular demographic continues to face persistent challenges when it comes to securing employment. Individuals with autism, spectrum disorder or Down syndrome have an unemployment rate significantly higher than the national average. It is estimated that 80 percent are unemployed or under employed.

Regrettably this population faces an uphill battle to overcome false perceptions about their abilities and capacity as employees. Many of those on the autism spectrum excel in specialized kinds of work like software testing, lap work and proofreading. They observe details that others miss and are able to focus for long periods of time. Naturally, they take well deserved pride in their distinctive abilities and atypical ways of viewing the world.

Similarly individuals with Down Syndrome are valued members of the work force when given the opportunity. Yet, despite their proven abilities, desire to work and the benefits to all parties involved, a lack of opportunity remains. Enhancing opportunities for these employees is not only beneficial from a business perspective but also from an overall society perspective.

Research shows employing individuals with disabilities reduces reliance on publicly funded adult services. With increased public awareness and the excellence shown by those already in the work force, many of the false notions about those with autism are starting to be debunked.

Today, small businesses are at the forefront of creating innovative business models that employ these highly competent and hard-working individuals. We are very happy to have some of them here today to share their experiences.

I hope this hearing will further dispel misconception while making it clear that great things are being done across the nation to bring more individuals with autism or Down syndrome into the work force.

I would like to thank the witnesses for testifying and look forward to your testimony. Thank you Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Chairman CHABOT. Thank you very much. The gentlelady yields back and if Committee members have opening statements prepared I ask that they be submitted for the record.

And I would like to take just a moment to explain the timing lights and our rules here. It is pretty simple. You get 5 minutes to testify. You will have a lighting system. The green light is on for 4 minutes, the yellow light will let you know that you have a minute to wrap up and then the red light will come on. And we would ask that you try to stay within those limits and when the red light comes on that is kind of it. So and I will now introduce our panel.

Our first witness this afternoon or this morning will be Ms. Angela Geiger. Ms. Geiger is the President and CEO of Autism Speaks here in Washington, D.C. Autism Speaks advocates and supports individuals with autism and their families including working with both employers and employees to increase employment opportunities for individuals with autism.

And I might note for the record that my Chief of Staff, Stacy, her daughter who is 18 years old has autism and she has educated me a great deal over the years and I have had the opportunity to speak to her class before and they have come to Capitol Hill to visit Washington and it is very inspiring to me. In fact Friday evening I got a text from Stacy and it was her daughter's prom and so she was coming down their steps in a very beautiful dress and she is just a beautiful young lady and it was very, it was really nice. So if anybody wants to see them they are on my iPhone here so.

And we will introduce our next witness. Our second witness will be Dave Friedman and he is the Founder and CEO of Autonomy Works in Downers Grove, Illinois. Autonomy Works is a small business providing digital marketing services for their clients and high tech jobs for individuals with autism and we welcome you here, Mr. Friedman.

Our next witness will be Mr. John Cronin. John is the Co-founder and Chief Happiness Officer of John's Crazy Socks in Melville, New York. John founded the company with his father, Mark, who is also with us here today and John's passion for crazy socks and spreading happiness led to a startup business that now employees 33 people including 15 with differing abilities. And we welcome you, John and his dad is welcome here, but John, you are especially welcomed here today. So thank you for coming. Thank you.

And I would now like to yield to the Ranking Member to introduce our final witness.

Ms. VELAZQUEZ. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to introduce Lori Ireland. She is a Co-founder of Extraordinary Ventures and the Vice Chair for Autism Society of America. For the last decade she has devoted her time and energy to creating jobs and opportunities for people with autism. She also serves as a Director for the Ireland Family Foundation, an organization that helps support research and direct services for adults on the autism spectrum. Ms. Ireland earned a master's in business administration from the University of California Berkley. Welcome. Thank you.

Chairman CHABOT. Thank you very much. And, Ms. Geiger, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENTS OF ANGELA TIMASHENKA GEIGER, PRESIDENT AND CEO, AUTISM SPEAKS; DAVE FRIEDMAN, FOUNDER AND CEO, AUTONOMYWORKS; JOHN CRONIN, CO-FOUNDER AND CHIEF HAPPINESS OFFICER, JOHN'S CRAZY SOCKS; LORI IRELAND PRESIDENT IRELAND FAMILY FOUNDATION

STATEMENT OF ANGELA TIMASHENKA GEIGER

Ms. GEIGER. Thank you. Good morning, Chairman and Ranking Member Velázquez and members of the Committee. I am Angela Timashenka Geiger, the President and CEO of Autism Speaks. We at Autism Speaks are dedicated to promoting solutions across the spectrum and throughout the life span for the needs of people with autism and their families. We do work on issues across the entire lifespan but place a special emphasis on adults with autism in part by providing tools and resources to expand employment opportunities.

Thank you very much for giving us the opportunity to talk to you about some of these overarching themes and trends for employing people with autism and how small businesses specifically are utilizing their unique ability to employ individuals with autism.

As you have mentioned, the employment rates of adults with disabilities is much lower than those for people without disabilities. And the employment rate of individuals with autism is lower still. 1 in 4 adults with disabilities like autism is employed whereas 1 in 3 adults with other disabilities hold a job in this current economy.

Each year an estimated 50,000 youth with autism transition from school into adult life, and over half of these people are disconnected from work or further education and training. But despite this, progress is being made. In the last year employment rates for people with disabilities have increased continuing the upward trend over the last 24 months. In fact in March of 2018 the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported the employment participation age rate for working age people with disabilities increased from 34.8 percent up from 32.3 percent the previous year. This rate of increase really importantly is greater than the rate of increase for people without disabilities. So these gains are really encouraging and suggest that some progress we are at least in the right direction.

So through our continued work on employment, we have identified three trends employing people with autism that we would like to highlight today. First, one of the most rapidly reported and reproduced trends is mission driven businesses. This is where social entrepreneurs create a business whose mission is to hire people with autism. You will see some of those examples here today.

Also an increasing number of large employers have announced autism employment initiatives to diversity their work force and certainly to attract more people into the work force with the employment rate as it is. We are really working at Autism Speaks to systematize some of those best practices so that they can be used much more widely in the public.

And the third major trend we see is an increase in the number of micro enterprises and small businesses established and operated by entrepreneurs with autism. Again you will hear more about that today from some of the other witnesses.

Some of the ways Autism Speaks directly impacts employment people with autism is through consultation, through creating a jobs portal workforce to providing absolutely free tool kits and training to small businesses and other business alike and we want to continue this trend and do more into the future. So while these trends and themes are promising, there does remain room for improvement in three specific ways.

First, transition services in schools must be improved and consistently start earlier. These transition services can start as early and should start as early as 14 or 16 depending on your state and must include coordination or cross vocational rehabilitation, special education and career services. Schools must work with community employers to help match student with available jobs.

Second, coordination, these coordination across service needs to be improved. Autism Speaks absolutely agrees with HHS's recommendation to Congress contained within the 2017 Autism Cares Report on a transition. What that did was increase alignment between different entities serving transition age youth. And that would result in more seamless service delivery and improve employment outcomes for adults. Again this coordination is so necessary for the success of people with autism and other disabilities.

And finally, the state level implementation of the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act of 2014 and Medicaid home and community based services needs to result in meaningful outcomes for adults with autism. When this act was passed in 2014 it included preemployment transition services as a strategy to improve employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

We at Autism Speaks are really working hard with states to figure out what is working really well and how we can replicate those models across other states and communities. And so employment truly is more than the key to independence. Our jobs are, in large part in the way we define ourselves. People with autism deserve the same rights in that as other people. And we look forward to working with you to strengthen that partnership. So thank you.

Chairman CHABOT. Thank you very much. Mr. Friedman, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. FRIEDMAN. Thank you. Chairman and Ranking Member, members of the Committee—

Chairman CHABOT. Do you want to turn the mic on?

STATEMENT OF DAVE FRIEDMAN

Mr. FRIEDMAN. Chairman and Ranking Member and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to share my story and a little bit about my team at Autonomy Works. I am Dave Friedman. I am sitting in front of you for only one reason. I am sitting here because of my son, Matthew. Matthew is 22 years old and like a lot of 22-year olds, he's an avid sports fan. He runs. He plays in a basketball league. He loves his iPad and his games. But unlike lots of 22-year olds, Matthew has autism. He has lots of skills. He is exceptional at math. He is very good with spatial learning.

But, his autism presents several challenges. He has a hard time with social interactions. He has a hard time with planning and organizing.

When kids with disabilities turn 14 and a half the school system is required to start a process called Transition Planning where you start to look at what a kid with a disability is going to do after they graduate from high school.

Matt has a lot of talents, but he wasn't likely to be successful in a traditional college environment. He doesn't have the social skills or the organizational skills. My wife and I started trying to figure out what he might do after he graduated from high school. And we were shocked, stunned literally, about how few opportunities existed in the professional world for people with autism.

There are very few jobs and the jobs that exist are largely low skill and don't take advantage of the talents that many people with autism have.

As Ms. Geiger said, Matthew is not alone. People with intellectual disabilities have very low work force participation rates. Where they do participate in the workforce, they have very high unemployment rates. Given that 50,000 people with autism graduate from the school system into the world of work every year, this presents a significant challenge for both families and communities.

For most of the people with autism, the challenge with employment is not the result of technical or functional skills. Many people with autism possess skills that are very valuable in today's work force—intense focus, comfort with numbers and process, and a passion for detail and quality. However, many people with autism have challenges that make it difficult for them to be successful in the workplace. Businesses large and small lack the knowledge and experience required to hire and manage this workforce. In 2012, I left my corporate career and founded Autonomy Works to help close this gap.

Autonomy-Works is a for-profit commercial business. We leverage the talents of people with autism to provide our clients with essential services. We have been operating for five years and serve more than 15 commercial clients. Each week, our team of Associates delivers hundreds of discreet tasks for our clients at exceptional levels of quality. We were built from the start to employ people with autism. We created a business system and a custom-tailored work environment to make them successful.

Since our founding, we have generated more than 70,000 hours of paid employment for adults with autism. We are growing and by the end of 2020 anticipate employing more than 100 people. Without their jobs at Autonomy-Works, most of these individuals would be relying on public assistance or the support of their families. Working at Autonomy-Works enables them to earn income while building skills that are valuable for many other jobs.

Across all of our employees, we have seen the challenge, the potential, and the transformation that happens when people get jobs. There are literally too many stories to possibly share with you here today. But if I could speak just of one, if I could speak as a father about my son, I have really seen how it has changed his life. When Matthew graduated from school, like lots of people with disabilities, he looked back to the security and the supports that he had when he was in high school and his transition program. Work has given him a new purpose. He has mastered public transportation. He attends a local community college so he can learn new skills to be

able to work and he is preparing to live independently. Matthew is building a life.

There is a lot more to be done. Small businesses generate a large portion of the jobs in the country. Small businesses are going to have to be part of the solution for people with disabilities. With your actions, this Committee has the ability to support small businesses that are trying to hire people with disabilities.

There are two specific things which I would like the Committee to consider going forward. The first is to expand the 8(a) Business Development Program to include businesses that hire people with disabilities. Today, participation is based on other criteria that don't incorporate these types of business.

Second, I would like to ask the Committee to support small business apprenticeship programs. Apprenticeships are a proven approach for transitioning people with disabilities into jobs. The scale of small businesses can make it difficult to develop and operate apprentice programs. We encourage this Committee to explore and support targeted initiatives that enable small business to build these programs collaboratively.

With that, Chairman, Ranking Member and members of the Committee, thank you for letting us share our story and more importantly the story of my colleagues at AutonomyWorks. I look forward to your questions.

Chairman CHABOT. Thank you very much. Mr. Cronin, you are recognized for 5 minutes whenever you are ready.

STATEMENT OF JOHN CRONIN

Mr. JOHN CRONIN. Good morning, Chairman Chabot, Ranking Member Velázquez and members of Committee. My name is John Cronin, and I am the Co-founder and Chief Happiness Officer of John's Crazy Socks. Thank you for inviting me to be here today as a representative and self-advocate of the National Down Syndrome Society.

I have Down syndrome and Down syndrome never holds me back. I am 22 years old and I work hard every day to show the world that people with Down syndrome are ready, willing and able to work. Giving us a chance and we can be successful.

I founded this business with my dad, Mark. It was my idea and I came up with the name. We have a mission to spread happiness. I love my business.

In the fall of 2016 I began my last year of school. I was ready to work. I did not need more school. I did not need more training. I wanted a good job like my brothers Patrick and Jamie. I told my dad that I wanted to go into business with him. We opened John's Crazy Socks in December 2016.

We show everyday what is possible. We show can work a great business. We have a ship over 100,000 orders and make over 300 million. I want you to know what people like us, like me can do. Give a chance to us.

Mr. MARK CRONIN. Thank you. Good job. John is a hard act to follow. My name is Mark Cronin and I am John's father and partner in John's Crazy Socks. Last year, the National Down Syndrome Society launched the End Law Syndrome Campaign. A national effort to spotlight those laws that hinder individuals with

Down syndrome and other disabilities from fulfilling their aspirations. As John puts it, Down syndrome doesn't hold me back, Law Syndrome does.

In my written testimony I address many of the specific legal changes we need to dismantle Law Syndrome. I want to highlight tow this morning. John already told you we have been fortunate enough to create 33 jobs, 15 of which are held by people with differing abilities. We have a unified work place. That leads to better morale, better retention and better productivity and we hire people not out of altruism but because it is good business.

We pay our minimum wage is \$12 an hour. That's \$1 more than the New York state minimum wage on Long Island. Our colleagues do not do minimal work so we don't pay them a minimum wage. The sad reality is that we could pay much less and these people and their families would still like them to come to work and that is because of the scarcity of good jobs for people with differing abilities.

But that would be wrong. Taking advantage of vulnerable workers may put more money in a business bank account but it would be morally bankrupt.

I was dismayed to learn that the section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Act of 1938 allows employers to pay people with a disability less than a minimum wage. This may have been acceptable in 1938 and that was a time when my son would have been institutionalized. But it's not acceptable today. It is outrageous that we sanction such discrimination.

People with disabilities can and do provide valuable work and should not be paid a wage that allows even well-meaning organizations to take advantage of their labors. It is time that all workers receive a fair wage for fair labor.

We ask that you support the TIME Act, HR 1377, a bipartisan bill that would phase out the practice of paying subminimum wage.

I also want to address the need to alter our Medicaid laws. They, so they support people of differing abilities and not hinder them. Our colleagues with disabilities work part-time. Why? Because if they work too many hours why will lose their Medicaid and they cannot afford to do so. I want you to take Matt, one of our colleagues who has Asperger's. He started work with us as a sock wrangler, that's what we call our pickers at our pick and pack warehouse. And he has now shown a talent so he is writing for our website. Matt would love to work 40 hours a week but cannot because he cannot afford to lose his Medicaid. Don't we all want Matt to work full-time? I know I do. Then why have laws that limit how much he can work?

And my son John here is a classic entrepreneur. He doesn't receive any benefits right now but he is entitled to them and likely will need them in the future and then he would have to choose between his benefits and his business. Do we want to prevent people from engaging in entrepreneurship?

It is time to decouple the poor from the disabled in our means tested programs so that people with differing abilities can work full-time and maximize their contributions to society. We want to encourage people to work, to find meaning in that work and to pay taxes so let's remove the disincentives to work.

Those are just two of the laws that discourage people with disabilities from becoming active and productive participants in their communities. Mr. Chairman and Committee members, let's show the amazing things that people with differing abilities can do. Give everyone a chance to demonstrate that they are ready, willing and able to work. Thank you for your time.

Chairman CHABOT. Thank you very much. Ms. Ireland, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF LORI IRELAND

Ms. IRELAND. Hi, I'm Lori Ireland. Thank you, Mr. Chabot and Ms. Velázquez. I am the elected chair as noted of the—Vice Chair of the Autism Society of America but I am here really as one of the founders of Extraordinary Ventures in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

I am sure everybody is aware of the statistics that come out from the CDC, et cetera. Angela, I think has mentioned the low employment amongst people with IDD. Extraordinary Ventures we founded in 2007 because and I'm going a little off script here so don't get mad. Because a group of us decided, you know, after age 22 it's called the cliff. There is, once you are out of the IDEA, covered under IDEA in the public schools, there is virtually nothing for you.

Now there are lots of rules and regulations that you all are told about, not enforced. So one of the important things that your Committee and our government at large is first of all enforce the proper rules and make sure the states are in compliance.

We have an operating budget of just over a million dollars. We are 80 percent business revenues and 20 percent private donations. We have 50 tax paying employees. They all, we think and this is an important distinction, we think most of them have a developmental disability. We don't have, we don't accept any government funding directly nor are we a medical facility so we don't know anybody's diagnosis. I think we could agree that if we knew that they wouldn't be allowed to work together.

It is the way the people with IDD are treated in our society is a civil rights violation in my opinion. The—anyone else can choose to live together or work together except our people. If they are identified as special needs then you have, it can only be two or this or that and that's ridiculous. We need to provide opportunities to everyone that wants to work and if they want to live or work together that should be fine.

We have accomplished our mission through old fashioned business practices. We operate real businesses. We decided we would run for profit businesses under a not for profit umbrella. So what we do is we match the skills of the people who apply for a job with jobs so if somebody likes to cook, we don't have cooking but we can make candles which is essentially the same thing.

So again, usually when you are running a small business you are solving at the bottom line for profit. We are solving for hours of employment. And our people are fabulous. We do not compete in any of our goods or services based on a disability. We operate in the real market at the same competitive rate as everyone else and that is the only way it can remain sustainable in our opinion.

We run six businesses currently. A pickup and delivery laundry business. I live in Chapel Hill so when I went to college I had to do my own laundry but nobody does now so and we are the preferred provider with a very long waiting list because we do the best job. We do not—the students and the private citizens who contract with us don't know until several bags in that most of the people have a developmental disability that are doing their laundry. So these are real small business.

Another one is a bulk mailing operation which is sort of back office kind of things. We have a gifts business. As I mentioned we make candles, lip balm, soaps, other things in order to capture that market and the people who want to cook without having to get into all the rules and regulations of food.

We have an EV pet business which has turned out about absolutely wonderful. These people are in the community, walking people's pets and you will just love some of these stories because we have a lot of senior citizens that contract mainly so that I think they can have the person come over and visit them every day. It's not—it is a win win situation. They bake cookies for Ewan because he is coming over to walk their dog. It's wonderful.

We also have a contract with the city of Chapel Hill and a certain line of buses. We have a bus cleaning crew because that is something we actually compete on a contractual basis with other vendors and that's something that can easily be regimented to a schedule. We also run an event center and that does not employ as many of our people as we would like but it does throw off revenue so that we can employ people in other businesses.

I think our key and I'm almost out of time is that we have flexibility to move people between businesses because your—the parent or guardian will come in and be absolutely certain they know what the person is good at and what they want to do. We find out that isn't always the case and we can slide them around amongst different business.

I also want to—I know I'm over time but we employ all parts of the spectrum. We have people who are college graduates and drive themselves to work and we have people who have to be helped in the door. We need your help as Mr. Cronin was saying to be able to support our people without them losing their benefits. Because you can't—we pay everybody. Minimum wage at least. And while I do advocate eventually getting rid of what we call supported workshops please don't tell that without replacing it with something else. There are many people in there that have worked there their whole lives. And if you just throw the baby out with the bath water we will have an even worse problem. I have a whole lot of other things I was supposed to say but my colleague said them so thank you very much.

Chairman CHABOT. Thank you very much and we will now move to the questioning and I will recognize myself for 5 minutes and I will start with you if I can, Mr. Friedman. How can we make business aware of the value individuals with autism for example can bring to the work force and move past maybe some hesitation that some people might have to hire them due to a perceived challenge or risk factors or whatever?

Mr. FRIEDMAN. There are an increasing number of organizations, Autonomy-Works, Extraordinary Ventures and others, that are starting to create case studies. One of our objectives is to change the way the world views people with autism. We are trying to create a story that can be told by organizations like Autism Speaks and others through the small business network to explain to people where successes have happened and to share some of the tools, techniques, and processes we have learned to make people successful in our place. We are starting to get the stories and now it is time to expand those and amplify them.

Chairman CHABOT. Thank you. Ms. Geiger, I will turn to you next if I can. Are there incentives available to encourage business to higher people with developmental disabilities? Are there various things that they may—there may be an incentive or a reward or whatever term you want to use?

Ms. GEIGER. I think some of the most important incentives are actually intrinsic to the hiring process of people with autism and other disabilities. We are finding that it is really increasing the productivity, retention, quality of work. Amazon, for example, did a pilot project in their pick and pack facility and found that the people with autism were out performing other employers so—or employees. And so the other thing is with the millennial generation coming into the work force, they are used to integrated environments and there have an expectation what people with autism and other disabilities are part of the workforce.

Chairman CHABOT. Very good. Thank you. Ms. Ireland, I will turn to you next if I can. Are there any common misconceptions about employing individuals with developmental disabilities and if so what can be done to address those misconceptions that perhaps others out there may have?

Ms. IRELAND. I think just exposure and education. If as my gentleman over here has pointed out, Mr. Friedman, and myself, we are—people that work for us sometimes leave us and go on to other jobs because now they have experience, they have learned how to be an employee. And they have proved to be wonderful. Others are celebrating 10 years working for us and it's the only job they have ever had. But the point is people need to get out there.

Angela mentioned transition services. This is—we really need to get people to understand our people are really good employees. The retention rate is practically 100 percent and they are very productive members but you have to see those people. We have to give an opportunity for everybody in our world to see them. And by running our small businesses in our community everybody knows us and so they steal some of our employees but that's okay.

Chairman CHABOT. Very good. Thank you. Mr. Cronin, I was going to ask your son but I will ask you, I know he is having some challenges coughing there which there is a lot going around right now. But I wanted to clue you in to a potential customer that you may want to consider. We had an election a while back, the gentleman is smiling down there from Utah and Jason Chaffetz left so there was an opening, an open seat there and John Curtis won that seat. And I read this in, I don't know if it was Roll Call or The Hill or Politico or something but he is known for like being a collector of like really cool socks.

And I was touring small businesses back in my district, I represent Cincinnati and it was—one of them happened to be a sock shop and they had some really cool socks. So I told them about John Curtis and so they gave me some socks to give to him and I actually finally got around to giving them to him last week, I don't know if he has got them on now, I'm guessing no, but I think there is a possible customer right here for your son. He is from Utah. His name is John Curtis and, John, how any socks do you have now or different, cool socks?

Mr. CURTIS. Well, Mr. Chairman, somebody once asked me to count and I stopped at 300.

Chairman CHABOT. Okay. So in any event you might want to talk to your son about a potential Utah customer.

Mr. JOHN CRONIN. I think we can help. If I could I would like to add on to the last question.

Chairman CHABOT. Yes, go right ahead.

Mr. JOHN CRONIN. I know part of our mission is to show what is possible. We want people to see what our workplace is like that, you know, it's a unified work place, people with differing abilities side by side with neuro typical people. It makes it a better place so when people come in and see that, that opens their minds to what is possible and I know part of what we do is we take that process and turn it into content that we share on social media. We are going so far as to create a John's Crazy Socks network that are going to feature shows, you know, put online that are hosted by or feature people with disabilities. Just so the world can see.

Chairman CHABOT. Yes, thank you very much.

Mr. JOHN CRONIN. The more people see the better off we will be.

Chairman CHABOT. And my time is expired but I might just mention that in our last hearing we had a young man who had started up a popcorn store that's gone nationwide and worldwide and universe wide and he has been making a lot of money and they're doing well and they've hired a lot of people and so these stories are all very inspirational. And, I mean, we ought to be doing a whole lot more of this so thank you. Thank you very much. And my time as I say is expired and I yield to the gentlelady for 5 minutes. Thank you.

Ms. VELAZQUEZ. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you all. It has been quite inspirational hearing to hear so many beautiful stories. And so we need to look at ways where we can improve the information that gets out there because at a time when unemployment rate is so low, this offers a real opportunity.

My first question is, have any of you reached out to the Small Business Administration to see how we can best bring that information to the small business community? Ms. Geiger?

Ms. GEIGER. We haven't done that in a formal way yet but I think it's a really interesting opportunity for us because at Autism Speaks we have actually created tool kits for employers that they can access free of charge. We have training for businesses who want to learn how to do this and so I think that that might be a fantastic venue to get more people aware of the opportunities.

Ms. VELAZQUEZ. Sure. Mr. Friedman?

Mr. FRIEDMAN. We have worked a little bit with the Small Business Administration looking for opportunities where we could collaborate. We host lots of people, two or three groups a week, at our facility to help explain what we do and how we do it. We talk about ourselves as an open source business and we share a lot of what we do. We would be very interested in collaborating with the Small Business Administration to speak or to create case studies or to talk to particular organizations interested in hiring people with disabilities.

Ms. VELAZQUEZ. Great. Ms. Ireland, have you ever had?

Ms. IRELAND. Yes. We have really gone the route of not using those sources because again it introduces a lot of complexity and difficulty and road blocks actually. So instead my husband and I in our private foundation along on a project with Autism Speaks some years ago we went around the United States and visited all these small business. We then ran town hall meetings in about eight or nine cities, I can't remember and then we culminated that in a conference in Chapel Hill where all these small businesses, including the popcorn guy, came together and it was such a joyful event because it showed what you can do if you just try. Say you have 5 families and maybe they saved for their child to go to college and they're not going to college. Just with that much investment you can start a business and employ people as we do.

Ms. VELAZQUEZ. Thank you. Mr. Cronin, what are the biggest barriers your son has faced as a young adult preparing to leave high school and transition into employment?

Mr. MARK CRONIN. Ms. Ireland refer to the 22 year old cliff. In New York, we call it the 21 year old cliff. Right. You finish school and this is kind of my large scale view of it. We have made tremendous strides in the medical area with John for example. He had intestinal bypass surgery on day 3 and open heart surgery before he was 3 months old. That would not have happened 10 years earlier, right.

We have done a pretty good job in the schools. It can always bet better. So we have people who are healthy, who are trained and then they hit that 21 year old cliff and there is nothing. We have this vast untapped pool of labor. And which is a great national resource and we are not able to put them to work. Employers need to be able to see past that first impression.

Ms. VELAZQUEZ. Yes.

Mr. MARK CRONIN. To see what the skills that people have as opposed to what they can't do. And some of that I don't think we can make them but we have to let them see through example how this is a benefit and they're not really going to have a choice because there is this growing shortage of labor and we have this pool of people that are ready, willing and able to work and they are great employees.

Ms. VELAZQUEZ. Thank you. Thank you. Mr. Friedman, one of the common misconceptions about hiring individuals with disabilities is the need for costly accommodations in the work place. Can you elaborate on the actions Autonomy Works took to accommodate its workforce?

Mr. FRIEDMAN. Right. We have discovered that the cost of accommodations is very low. We have very small accommodations for

people. We have a sensory room where people can go take a break if they become overwhelmed from a sensory perspective. A number of people have headphones and so forth but the average accommodation for our associates is less than \$100.

Ms. VELAZQUEZ. Okay. My time has expired

Chairman CHABOT. Thank you very much. The gentlelady's time is just about to expire so the gentleman from Kansas, Mr. Marshall, is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. MARSHALL. All right. Well, thanks so much. I just, I wish John was in here to tell him but, you know, today we are going to meet astronauts, the Secretary of Energy, the Secretary of Transportation. I met Peter Navarro, but John Friedman is the most inspirational person I will meet today. And that is just the message of hope I would give everybody. I am so impressed that, you know, this concept that a job brings value to people and that—and that's what folks want. I have been able to visit 6, 7, maybe 8 different facilities that give work opportunities to folks with disabilities and just to see the happiness, the hop in their step is a great thing.

You know, what else can we do to empower you? We have got legislation you have talked about. What else can we do to empower as a Congress to put wind beneath your sails. Anything else that you all might mention you want to talk about?

Ms. IRELAND. May I go first?

Mr. MARSHALL. Yes.

Ms. IRELAND. Okay. Increase the substantial gainful activity level at least to the level of those who are blind. Substantially increase the resource limit for SSI and annually indexed for inflation. Enact simplification of work incentives including allowing ongoing presumptive reentitlement to Title II disability benefits and ongoing eligibility for Medicare for those whose benefits and for those who lose benefits to be continue to be employed. Provide cash assistance outside of Social Security to assist working individuals with disabilities in meeting their disability related costs regardless of their income or assets. Enact technical and substantive changes to the Ticket to Work and work incentives programs to ensure the law works as intended. Protect the Affordable Care Act and provide incentives to states to expand Medicaid authorized by the law. Support the Able Act and bills to expand it. Thank you.

Mr. MARSHALL. All right. And those last comments were meant for John Cronin, sorry, Mr. Friedman, if I said you. I meant it for John, he had stopped out a little bit. Mr. Cronin, anything else you would add to help empower you all?

Mr. MARK CRONIN. I only half-jokingly say John and I are a couple of knuckleheads from Long Island running a sock company. We don't have any special training. We hire people. We make accommodations that any employer would make for any employee. The biggest hurdle we see are the limits that our employees face to work and that is because they're dependent on their Medicaid and that's means tested and that runs contrary to wanting people to work. So we have to find the way to decouple that so that people can work to the fullest extent possible and still receive the benefits they need to support themselves.

Mr. MARSHALL. Okay. I mean, I would just add that we need to drive the cost of healthcare down so you can afford to purchase

health insurance for these employees again equal footing with the other types of—

Mr. MARK CRONIN. Well, there is one thing to know. We do provide health insurance for our employees.

Mr. MARSHALL. Great.

Mr. MARK CRONIN. But Medicaid provides services that traditional health insurance doesn't provide that is essential for people with disabilities.

Mr. MARSHALL. Right. And that is why it is so important that we prioritize Medicaid dollars for those who need them the most. As opposed to people who are fully employable but choose not to be. Mr. Friedman, did you have something you wanted to add?

Mr. FRIEDMAN. Yes, first of all I would agree with everything that these folks said. Two other things. Transportation ends up being a significant issue for many of our employees. Some of our employees commute as far as 90 minutes to get to work so improved infrastructure for transportation would allow more people to work at a location like ours.

And second, the WIOA spending bill calls out investment in people with disabilities and we would encourage Congress to maintain the flexibility in those numbers so that we can continue to innovate and try to create new ways to hire people with disabilities as opposed to just investing in old ways.

Mr. MARSHALL. Okay. Ms. Geiger, we have got 30 seconds left if you want to add something.

Ms. GEIGER. Sure. I would just reiterate this idea of starting early. You know, there are systems and laws and acts in place and starting to plan for employment in adulthood at 14 is something that parents and people with autism themselves really need to be aware of and take advantage of the resources that are available within the school system so that you are successful when you leave the school system.

Mr. MARSHALL. Thank you and I yield back.

Chairman CHABOT. Thank you. The gentleman yields back. And the gentleman from Pennsylvania, Mr. Evans, who is a Ranking Member of the Subcommittee on Economic Growth, Tax and Capital Access, is recognized for 5 minutes and I would like to compliment him as well as other members on both sides of the aisle who had bills passed on the floor of the House yesterday. Almost all of them were bipartisan and this is one Committee that actually works together in a bipartisan manner and I want to commend the Ranking Member for that as well. So the gentleman is recognized.

Mr. EVANS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to thank you and the Ranking Member for both your leadership on allowing all of us to participate so I thank you.

And I do want to stress that I have not met anybody who doesn't want to work. I think that is very important to stress because in my district, Temple University, the College of Education has an institute on disability. They match eligible people with intellectual and development disability to unpaid internships at Temple University Hospital and Temple University in Philadelphia. The goal of achieving long term and part time employment.

What can we do to promote greater partnerships through these small business owners and local universities to help people with

disabilities as well as how can we expand this cross fertilization of local universities expertise to promote the employment of people with disabilities and small business. So that is for the panel. Two questions asked.

Mr. FRIEDMAN. The local community system, particularly the community college system provides a great opportunity to transition people as they finish transition programs. People have talked about a 21 or 22 years old and it's a place to go to start to develop skills. We recently participated in an initiative with the vocational rehabilitation group in Illinois, the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, and the local community college to identify people with disabilities, jointly enroll them in training at Autonomy-Works and the community college and employ supports from the state to enable them to transition into jobs. We ended up hiring 10 people at Autonomy-Works and trained and offered apprenticeships to more than 50 through that program.

Mr. EVANS. Any other person on the panel?

Ms. IRELAND. Yes, I would like to go. When we founded Extraordinary Ventures it was growing pretty slowly and so I yielded my board seat to my husband who is a more creative thinker than I am and he got this idea of tapping into the social entrepreneurship sort of spirit in the United States and again I live in a college town, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill is right there. You have lots of young people.

Analogous to teach for America they want to be social entrepreneurs. They want to come out. They don't necessarily have any experience with disabilities but they get to run businesses and start new business and learn a whole different part of society and they work a little less expensively than your typical employee. So I think tapping into the universities and that spirit of social entrepreneurship amongst neuro typicals would be very helpful.

Mr. EVANS. Thanks.

Ms. GEIGER. One of the other things that's really important is getting the word out. Hearings like these, replicating services, and one of the things we are really working on and toward at Autism Speaks is really cataloging and codifying these kind of best practices so that when someone is working in a local university or a local college they don't have to reinvent the wheel. Gosh, here is what works really well at Temple or here is what works really well at another university. And replication should happen as fast as we can make it.

Mr. EVANS. I would like to go to John. John, how can we help schools better assist those with disabilities enter the work force?

Mr. MARK CRONIN. The schools there are two general things that they are addressing. There is generally life skills and they do a pretty good job on that. It is more the transition skills and specific job skills that could be used in the community so that's I think doing a better job of matching local schools with businesses so the schools know what jobs are out in their local business.

I know some of what we do, we host school tours so we have 6 to 8 schools that come each week to visit our office and warehouse and we host school work experience groups that they will bring a group in once a week for an hour or two just to know what it is like to get in the workplace. I think those are the types of pro-

grams that would help make that transition from schooling to employment.

Mr. EVANS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back the balance of my time.

Chairman CHABOT. Thank you very much. The gentleman yields back. The gentleman from Utah, Mr. Curtis, is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. CURTIS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member for holding this hearing. I can't tell you how pleased I was to hear that there was a John coming to talk about crazy socks. And Washington, D.C. has lots of problems and one of those is too many boring socks. And I have been trying to work with my colleagues to get them to take the lunge and not having a lot of success and so maybe John can help me. And I believe we have an appointment later in the day and look forward to expressing my admiration to him. He was pretty brave to be here this morning. And look forward to a discussion with him.

Chairman CHABOT. If the gentleman would yield for just a moment—

Mr. CURTIS. Please.

Chairman CHABOT. I, you might have a better audience with our democratic friends. Maybe the Republicans, we are just kind of concerned about our socks—

Mr. CURTIS. They are more progressive with things and maybe socks is one of those right.

Chairman CHABOT. Maybe wrong but—

Mr. CURTIS. I think John has probably found this but they make people smile. And they make people happy. I was mayor of my town back in Provo and I found that by wearing a fun pair of socks people would stop and talk to me that wouldn't otherwise talk to me and I found myself pulling up my pant legs every three or four feet down the road showing people my socks. So my hat is off to him and what he has been able to accomplish.

I do have a couple of questions and maybe start with you, Mr. Cronin, and the others please jump in. I have been thinking a lot about your comments about equal pay and to be honest its changed a little of a paradigm in my mind and so if you don't mind I would just like to kind of explore that with you and if I show some biases in my paradigm, please forgive me because I am just trying to now understand what you have told me that I haven't really heard before.

And my assumption before this was that there were a lot of benefits to providing opportunities for people with disabilities to work. One of which was compensation but there were many other benefits as well. Can you just help me get my arms around that as I would, might have an opportunity to approach employers and lobby for your requests and help me understand how, the whole picture of working?

Mr. MARK CRONIN. The work is important. Particularly here in the States, right. What do we ask somebody? What do you do? You meet somebody, what do you do? So having the job gives value and meaning to people. The wage is part of it. The wage, we don't feel better necessarily by being paid more but if we are underpaid that gnaws at us and that applies to everybody because if you are un-

derpaid you feel undervalued. What we find is people are doing work of real value. And I understand about the sheltered workshops but they are people doing real value there too. And we ought to be paying them at least the minimum wage. That's part of what they're getting, what they should be getting at work because everybody gets at work.

And we do find that we do have some, you know, we think of them as they have evolved into special programs for our differing abled employees because we are always helping them learn things. So a small thing we gave everybody an email address even if they didn't have a computer to use and we showed them, we put it on their phone so everybody would learn how to communicate via email. And we gave everybody a business card because that gave them some pride in their job and we make it pay. They have a discount on the back of it and we have a discount contest going on.

We run programs now, we think of it as a program, of at least once a month we have an after hours work program. So last week we took them to a dinner. We took everybody in the company to a dinner hosted by the Chamber of Commerce because a lot of our folks don't have those social opportunities. So here is a way for them to get out without necessarily mom and dad to learn how to carry themselves.

The wage becomes part of that. If we want them to be independent, if we want them to carry their weight in society, we have to pay a fair wage and so when we turn and say you're worth less—we have a bad history in this country of telling people they're worth less than other folks in the country and we shouldn't be doing that with the differing abled. We should recognize what they do and one way to do that is with pay.

Mr. CURTIS. Thank you. Unfortunately I am almost out of time but let me just emphasize that and thank you for helping me understand that as well as treating them equally with things like email addresses and the many other things that you listed. As you explain it it seems so obvious to me but I am not sure we have all thought about it.

Mr. MARK CRONIN. Its, none of what we do is rocket science. It's fairly basic. Like I say and John will be back in a minute, we are a couple knuckleheads from Long Island running a sock business. And you're just treating people well and it turns out they respond better and are better employees because of it.

Mr. CURTIS. Thank you. I am out of time but I look forward to seeing John and his knuckleheaded father a little in the day, later in the day. I yield my time, thank you.

Chairman CHABOT. Thank you. The gentlelady from American Samoa, Ms. Radewagen, who is the Chairman of the Subcommittee on Health and Technology is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mrs. RADEWAGEN. Good morning and thank you, Chairman Chabot, Ranking Member Velázquez for holding this hearing. Thank you all for testifying here today. I think I am going to go back to Mr. Cronin and direct my questions to you although they have been partially answered along the way.

I think that John, John's success story is an inspiration not only because of what he has been able to accomplish but also because of the challenges he, you, his parents, and so many other people

with Down syndrome have had to overcome to achieve their aspirations.

In fact, my sister Seena Tiana Coleman, she was born with Down syndrome and she just passed away at the age of 59, exactly one week ago on May 1. And we learned so much from her. We were 13 children and she taught us about the joys over the simple things in life, you know, and unconditional love. But soon after she was born, the doctors said that she should be institutionalized and not to ever put any assets into her name. Well, my parents didn't pay much attention to that and they raised her, she got an education and she led a very active life and an independent life as long as there was an adult not too far from where she was.

But at any rate, so you have told us about some of the challenges you faced along the way and whether it was getting the appropriate education or getting access to the support and services that John needed. John is your son, right? Or is it Mark? Yes, you are Mark and John needed to——

Mr. MARK CRONIN. I'm his chauffeur.

Mrs. RADEWAGEN.—to ensure that opportunities that are available to all Americans would be available to people like John and my sister Seena.

So I think you have partially answered this but what advice would you give to future entrepreneurs and their families who look up to John's success?

Mr. MARK CRONIN. Well, if you look at what we did, you know, the story is John was in his last year of school. He wanted, he had already had a job working with me in an office. He wanted meaningful work. It was plain to him one way to do it was create something himself. So he came and said I want to go into business with you. He had a couple of nonstarter ideas. We could tell you about the food truck. But when he came and said we should sell socks and he had the name and drawings of a website, it was really a matter of let's go test it.

There is a lean start up movement in this country that instead of spending a lot of time on business plans, go and test it and you will find out. You will find out whether or not people respond and then learn as you go. When people approach us, I don't have any magic answers. I encourage people if you have an idea go and find out. Go and take that chance. The worst thing that happens is you lose your startup money and for a business like this, that was a couple thousand dollars. That's, I wish I had a better answer to, you know, do A, B, and C but it is, you know, John has to be like any other entrepreneur. If you get an idea go out and stand in the marketplace and see if it is going to succeed.

Mrs. RADEWAGEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Chairman CHABOT. Thank you very much. The gentlelady yields back and I think on behalf of all the members of the Committee we wish you condolences for the loss of your sister Seena. As you may know I lost my brother two weeks ago as well so we have got lots of, yes, he was my older brother. He was a Democrat by the way too. I was the only Republican he ever voted for so. I think he voted for me. He said he did but no, he was a great guy.

In any event, I think the gentleman from South Carolina, Mr. Norman is next. He is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. NORMAN. Thank you so much. I appreciate you all, your being here and this is moving to see your son. We, my office takes part in the Mason Light program and I am a small business guy. We run a construction company, development company and what would help and I know we have tried and we have had hired those with disabilities. I don't need to tell you it's a litigious society. The trial argues everywhere and as a small business owner, we want to find ways to hire people with disabilities.

What would help from a practical side is to reach out to the businesses to say you have a particular child with, that has a talent that may be good at something with construction which is what we do. Or a particular field of mixing mortar for a masons job. And then I will tell you it is not going to, I don't have to have government to tell me what I am going to have to pay. We will pay over because of just of the nature of helping somebody.

So that would help in my mind to—as you move forward and as you want to find ways, all the questions have been asked but from a practical standpoint, reach out to us and say what need do you have? Then I have this particular individual with a disability. He can do I think give him a chance. I don't think there is a business in this country that wouldn't reach out and try to accommodate because it is the goodness of people that wants to help your son but we just don't know a lot of times and you get so busy running your company, I don't have time to go to the vocational rehab and see who is there but reach back out to us. That would pay dividends in my mind. But thank you for what you are doing. You are bringing things to light that is very useful and again, it is moving to see.

Chairman CHABOT. Does the gentleman yield back? Yes.

Mr. NORMAN. Yes, I am sorry, I yield back.

Chairman CHABOT. Thank you. The gentleman yields back. We want to thank the witnesses here and the members on both sides today. I would like to recognize somebody else who is in the audience here, Chip Gerhardt who is from my district. I don't know if Chip is the head of the Down Syndrome Society?

Mr. GERHARDT. Former board chair.

Chairman CHABOT. Former board chair. That's right. And Chip's daughter Ann has been an inspiration to me and all the rest of Cincinnati over the years as we have watched her grow up and is now, you know, a wonderful young woman who is working. Isn't she working at Kroger?

Mr. GERHARDT. Kroger.

Chairman CHABOT. Yes. So she is great and I have learned a lot just be interacting with her and a lot of other great constituents of mine back in Cincinnati who have Down syndrome or autism or a whole range of other challenges in life. And this hearing is about the most inspirational hearing that we have had since the one we had about two years ago. And it was basically the same topic and so thank you. And, Mark, thanks. You have got a great son. We are really happy that we got to meet him today and we hope you sell a lot of socks in the future and I wasn't kidding when I said the guy from down there, he is, he will keep you in business for a long time on his own I think.

But in any event, we would ask unanimous consent that all members have 5 legislative days to submit statements and supporting materials for the record. Without objection, so ordered.

And if there is no further business to come before the Committee, certainly there couldn't be anything that has been more inspiring than this morning and now into this afternoon. We are adjourned. Thank you very much.

[Whereupon, at 12:08 p.m., the Committee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX



Testimony of
 Angela Timashenka Geiger, President and CEO, Autism Speaks
Ready, Willing and Able to Work:
How Small Businesses Empower People with Developmental
Disabilities
 Before the Committee on Small Business
 United States House of Representatives
 May 9, 2018

Good morning Chairman Chabot, Ranking Member Velázquez and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about a topic that is of great importance to the autism community: how small businesses empower people with developmental disabilities to work.

I am Angela Timashenka Geiger, President and CEO of Autism Speaks. Autism Speaks is dedicated to promoting solutions, across the spectrum and throughout the life span, for the needs of individuals with autism and their families. We do this through advocacy and support; increasing understanding and acceptance of autism spectrum disorder; and advancing research into causes and better interventions for autism spectrum disorder and related conditions.

While we work on issues across the lifespan, Autism Speaks places a significant emphasis on supporting adults on the spectrum, in part by providing tools and resources to expand employment opportunities and workplace supports for individuals with autism. One of our community's most daunting challenges – finding and retaining employment – is being tackled by entrepreneurs and small businesses. Across the country, small businesses are utilizing their unique flexibility to create accommodating and innovative business practices that sustainably employ individuals with autism, expose students earlier in their education to real-world work experience, and provide opportunities for work-based learning and technical skill attainment.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak with you about some of the overarching themes and trends in autism employment.

Recognizing the Need

The employment rates of adults with disabilities are about half of people without disabilities; the employment rates of individuals with autism are lower still. According to the State Employment Leadership Network's 2016 National Report on Employment Services and Outcomes, the workforce participation rate for adults with cognitive disabilities is less than 25 percent – ten percent lower than

the participation rate for adults with any other type of disability.¹ When employed, people with these disabilities are more likely to work part-time and earn much less than those with less significant disabilities.² The need to close this employment gap is clear: each year, an estimated 50,000 youth with autism transition from school into adult life, and over half are disconnected from work or further education and training.³

Some of the barriers to employment for people with autism stem from difficulty with communication and social interaction. Unfortunately, these challenges are often amplified in typical employment scenarios – such as in a traditional interview process, daily interaction with coworkers, or even traveling to the workplace. Many such barriers can be mitigated through appropriate accommodations, tailored to the individual and implemented by the employer. These accommodations are often free or inexpensive. Employers benefit significantly by including a neuro-diverse workforce that contributes to overall productivity and an enriched social climate.⁴

Small businesses, by far, form the “economic engine” of the United States economy and employ 65 percent of the workforce today.⁵ Despite this, a lower percentage of people with disabilities, and more specifically those with autism, are employed in small businesses.⁶ Autism Speaks believes this is an opportunity to improve.

Trends in Disability Employment

While employment opportunities for people with disabilities have substantially improved since the Great Recession, the gap, in comparison to those without disabilities, continues to persist at almost the same rate.⁷ According to the March 2018 Jobs Report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the labor participation rate of people with disabilities age 16-64 was 34.8 percent – less than half of that for people without disabilities (76.7 percent).⁸ Women with disabilities have lower rates of employment than their male counterparts.⁹

However, despite the continued low rates of disability employment, progress is being made. In the last year, employment rates for people with disabilities have increased (up from 32.3 percent in March

¹Winsor, J., Timmons, J., Butterworth, J., Shepard, J., Landa, C., Smith, F., Domin, D., Migliore, A., Bose, J., & Landim, L. (2017). *StateData: The National Report on Employment Services and Outcomes 2016*. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion.

²Winsor, et al.

³Roux, A., Shattuck, P., Rast, J., Rava, Julianna A., & Anderson, K. (2015). *National Autism Indicators Report: Transition into Young Adulthood*. Philadelphia, PA: Life Course Outcomes Research Program, A.J. Drexel Autism Institute, Drexel University.

⁴Austin, R. D., & Pisano, G. P. (2017). Neurodiversity as a competitive advantage. Harvard Business Review, retrieved from: <https://hbr.org/2017/05/neurodiversity-as-a-competitive-advantage>

⁵ <https://www.dol.gov/odep/pdf/SmallBusinessFactSheet.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/SmallBusiness.htm>

⁷ Livermore, G., & Honeycutt, T. (2015). Employment and economic well-being of people with disabilities before and after the Great Recession. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 26, 70 – 79.

⁸United States Department of Labor. (2018, April). Table A-6. Employment status of the civilian population by sex, age, and disability status, not seasonally adjusted. *United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics*. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empstat.t06.htm>

⁹Ibid.

2017).¹⁰ Disability employment has increased steadily over the last 24 months.¹¹ The rate of increase for workers with disabilities is greater than the rate for people without disabilities. These gains are encouraging, but much work remains to achieve parity in employment for people with and without disabilities.

Trends in Employing People with Autism

Despite the low employment rate of individuals with autism, research indicates that many adults with autism are willing and able to work.¹² There continues to be a significant increase in the demand for employment opportunities within the autism community. We have increasingly heard from self-advocates, family members, service providers, and other community members about the need to create employment opportunities for adults with autism.

Autism Speaks witnessed this increased demand at Small Business Town Hall meetings we held in cities across the United States. We testified about these activities before this Committee in 2016 and continue to see demand for replicable, promising practices and opportunities for small businesses. Employers continue to highlight the strengths and achievements of employees with autism and their resulting business success which further increases the interest among the autism and business communities to create work opportunities.

As communities are demanding more employment opportunities for adults with autism, progress is also being made through the implementation of recently enacted federal and state policies. These include the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014, which requires state vocational rehabilitation agencies to focus on serving transition-age youth with disabilities and support competitive integrated employment. In 2017, Autism Speaks began surveying states about the status of the implementation of WIOA and their efforts to serve individuals with autism. As we learn more from these efforts, we are beginning to identify emerging trends not only in best practices but also in service gaps.

In addition, state Medicaid Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS) programs are increasingly reshaping their day services to focus less on non-paid activities and more on paid employment. Forty-six states have adopted Employment First initiatives which strive to make community employment the default outcome for people with disabilities receiving publicly funded services.¹³ Autism Speaks is working hard at the local level to make sure the implementation of these policies is helping people with autism get jobs.

On all levels, small businesses and entrepreneurs are responding to the increasing numbers of adults with autism who are eager to work. Through our continued work on employment, we have identified three trends in autism employment that we would like to highlight for the Committee today.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹National Trends in Disability Employment (nTIDE). (2018). *nTIDE March 2018 Jobs Report: Job Growth for Americans with Disabilities Reaches Two-Year Milestone*. (2018). Retrieved from Research on Disability. <https://researchondisability.org/news-features/2018/04/06/ntide-march-2018-jobs-report-job-growth-for-americans-with-disabilities-reaches-two-year-milestone>

¹²Roux, et al.

¹³Winsor, et al.

Mission-Driven Businesses

One of the most prevalent and rapidly reproduced autism employment models we have seen is the Mission-Driven Business, wherein a social entrepreneur creates a business whose mission is to hire people with autism or other developmental disabilities. Both AutonomyWorks and Extraordinary Ventures are great examples of this model and are providing a needed service to their local autism communities. Other successful businesses that follow this model include Rising Tide car wash in Florida, Puzzles Bakery in New York, and SMILE Biscotti in California. Although these businesses can be established in any market sector, we most frequently see bakeries and coffee shops, small item manufacturers and high-tech firms.

Diversity Hiring Initiatives

In recent years, a number of employers – including Microsoft, SAP, DXC, JPMorgan, Ernst & Young, and Ford – have announced autism employment initiatives. Most often these are initiatives undertaken by large corporations and firms that seek to diversify their workforce by hiring individuals with autism. Many of these firms participated in the *Autism at Work* annual conference at which Autism Speaks has participated. Attracted by the unique talents of individuals with autism, these larger firms actively seek out neuro-diverse college graduates.

Many employers – large and small – are interested in developing similar hiring initiatives. Autism Speaks regularly connects businesses, service providers, and job seekers, and we are continuing to explore how best we can serve as a central connection point. We hope to systematize and track those connections and partnerships, utilizing our online platforms to collect and disseminate information about these corporate initiatives to job seekers on the spectrum.

Micro-enterprises and Self-Employment

The third major trend we see in autism employment is the increase in the number of micro-enterprises and small businesses established and operated by entrepreneurs with autism. John's Crazy Socks is a perfect example of how entrepreneurship can be a tremendously successful employment option for individuals with developmental disabilities. Previously this committee heard from another successful micro-enterprise – Poppin' Joe's Kettle Corn based in Kansas. Micro-enterprise and self-employment have been particularly successful for artists with autism who can generate income selling their works. Entrepreneurship offers a great level of flexibility and job customization that can be built around the individual with autism.

In an effort to support these entrepreneurs, we are proud to host a page on our website called "Shop a Little, Help A Lot!"¹⁴ This page features products and goods available for purchase that are created by individuals with autism. Customers can shop for gifts and treats while supporting the autism community.

Promoting Solutions

In addition to studying successful business models for autism employment, Autism Speaks is committed to becoming a central resource where employers of any scale can share strategies, best practices, and resources. In exploring these flexible approaches to promote employment of adults with autism, we have identified three overarching themes that have proven successful in increasing employment for people with autism – consultation, collaboration and community resources.

¹⁴<https://www.autismspeaks.org/shop-little-help-lot>

Consultation

Not all small businesses know how to recruit, retain, and advance individuals with autism. We believe that creating communities of experts and invested partners who can share information about accommodations and best practices is essential to helping small businesses unlock the potential of this untapped workforce.

Since 2017, we have focused on bringing high-quality consultation to businesses interested in employing adults with autism. Teams of experienced corporate disability consultants recruited and supported by Autism Speaks and NEXT for AUTISM work with community organizations (such as employment service providers) and national and regional businesses interested in hiring people with autism. This has enabled us to assist companies to develop autism-focused disability hiring initiatives that build a diverse labor and customer pool while providing a positive return on investment. Cintas, Staples, Quest Diagnostics and a number of other companies are working with us on this effort. Each company receives consultation from a member of a team of national disability consultants – experienced professionals who have directed many of the most high-profile disability and inclusion projects in the country, including companies such as Walgreens, Best Buy, Office Depot/Max, PepsiCo, and Mercy Health.

Professional consultation provides a wealth of information to businesses. Businesses often request autism and disability-related training for employees as well as specific training on how to develop job accommodations and leverage natural supports. In addition, consultants have helped employers learn how to source qualified employees and customers with autism and similar disabilities and how to capture tax- and other business-related incentives. Finally, businesses have leveraged content knowledge to market their work in this area successfully: businesses marketing the quality and usefulness of their product – as opposed to marketing the fact that the staff are people with autism – have proven to have more successful campaigns.

Our goal is to mobilize technical assistance experts and disability employment consultants across the country and make their expertise more accessible to the autism and small business communities. Rather than a “one size fits all” approach, technical assistance based on the individual needs, goals, and financial resources of each small business has proved hugely successful. We estimate that for every \$1 Autism Speaks invests in consulting, a person with autism will earn \$27.38 in wages. We hope that others who invest in the space will see similar returns.

Collaboration

There are many organizations and businesses that are working towards increasing employment opportunities for adults with autism, and we have found that collaboration is a critical component to achieving success. Some promising collaborations we have developed include a database on AutismSpeaks.org and the Autism Employment Network on LinkedIn where individuals can share information, learn from one another, and grow their networks in order to create greater opportunities for workers with autism. To further assist employers, we developed An Employer’s Guide to Hiring and Retaining Employees with Autism Spectrum Disorder in collaboration with leading experts in the field, self-advocates and community members.

Through ongoing partnership with Microsoft’s autism hiring initiative, we sponsored the Autism Empowerment Kit. This resource provides employers guidance, recommendations, and strategies for

providing support and workplace accommodations to empower employees with autism throughout their careers.¹⁵

Autism Speaks formed a national funders' collaborative with Kessler Foundation, May and Stanley Smith Charitable Trust, NEXT for Autism, and Poses Family Foundation. This collaborative has committed more than \$7.5 million since 2014 to support groundbreaking work in disability and inclusion in employment. The collective funding allows private companies, non-profit organizations, schools and universities, and public agencies to work together in new and innovative ways to expand employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

The collaborative supports the Pepsi ACT (Achieving Change Together) initiative as well as the US Business Leadership Network® (USBLN®) "Going for the Gold" initiative. Forthcoming efforts will promote the establishment of public-private partnerships in local communities and the distribution of an Employer's Guide to Disability and Inclusion Programs to corporations around the U.S.

This collaboration has also developed online tools and resources for employers designed to help companies recruit, hire, and retain employees with disabilities. These web-based supports include facts and case studies to show how disability inclusion drives business value as well as a do-it-yourself guide that will provide a business all the information it needs to start or enhance a disability employment and inclusion program in seven clear steps.¹⁶

Autism Speaks routinely collaborates with academic institutions, supporting their work with knowledge translation. This collaboration helps bring a "design thinking" framework in innovating for locally developed practices in employment. For example, Autism Speaks is advising Cornell University's Yang-Tan Institute and DXC Technology in their efforts to scale-up their model towards employment solutions for people with autism.

We are also working with other leaders in disability employment as well as state and federal policymakers to improve employment outcomes for adults with autism. Specifically, our Public Health & Inclusion Team is working with Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment and Policy-funded multi-agency effort to identify public policy and programmatic solutions that support employment outcomes and economic well-being of individuals with autism that are receiving welfare benefits. Along with inputs from Social Security Administration and other academic researchers, we are continuing to articulate employment-related support needs for individuals with autism.

Finally, Autism Speaks has made the commitment to contract with businesses that employ people with autism. As other corporations do, we contract with other vendors to supply resources like t-shirts and items for our fundraising walks. Spectrum Designs – which employs people with autism – provides these materials for us and we are their largest client.

Community Resources

Collaboration with employers and other partners on its own is not enough – Autism Speaks understands we must also provide information and resources to assist individuals with autism, family members, service providers, and other community members. To do so, we have developed and shared different

¹⁵ <https://gisc.bsr.org/files/BSR-GISC-Autism-Empowerment-Kit.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://workplaceinitiative.org/guide/>

resources including our Employment Tool Kit which provides resources and information to help adults with autism research, find and keep employment in today's competitive labor market.

In addition, we have developed a parent's guide on how to help one's child gain competitive employment. We maintain an expanding roster of large companies across the country that have made a concerted effort to publish their inclusion and diversity policies and share this database publicly to help job hunters with autism know where to apply. All of these resources are available on our website at www.AutismSpeaks.org.

Finally, we launched www.TheSpectrumCareers.com in 2015, which is a jobs portal designed to promote inclusive employment of the autism community by proactively matching job seekers with businesses as well as employment service providers.

Looking Forward

Autism Speaks is proud to work with an integral part of our nation's economy – small businesses – to improve employment outcomes for individuals with autism, increase individuals' chances for self-sufficiency and independence, and help businesses improve their bottom line. Our collaborative efforts with the small business community and the broader public strive to spread awareness about the benefits of employing individuals with autism, develop innovative and sustainable business models and hiring practices, and provide technical assistance to implement best practices. What we have learned is clear—**the innovation and flexibility unique to small businesses and entrepreneurs enable them to lead the way in employing individuals with autism.**

Small businesses are in a position not only to develop new models that employ individuals with autism but also to innovate in a way that responds directly to local labor market needs. The connection many small businesses have with their communities is vital to creating the partnerships necessary to transition young adults into the local workforce, share best practices with other local businesses, and nurture a workforce comprised of people with varying abilities. The small business community is central to building a society that understands the dignity of work and values the contributions of people with autism.

Capabilities of Small Business

The small business community is uniquely fit to overcome the historical barriers many adults with autism face in their efforts to join the workforce. The barriers to employment associated with autism spectrum disorders themselves – especially difficulty communicating and navigating social norms – are easily mitigated through achievable modifications. Employers report that a high percentage (59%) of job accommodations cost absolutely nothing to make, while the rest typically require a one-time investment of only \$500.¹⁷ Small businesses can work directly with individuals on the spectrum to understand their needs and strengths, find accommodations that work, and implement those practices consistently throughout the workplace and across all phases of employment.

Similarly, small businesses can harness their close community ties to leverage natural and other supports to help individuals with autism achieve employment. Small businesses are in a superior position to benefit from existing community-focused programs meant to prepare and support transitioning students with autism. Through individualized education plans, vocational rehabilitation,

¹⁷ Loy, B. (2005, updated 2017). *Workplace Accommodations: Low Cost, High Impact*. Morgantown, WV: Job Accommodation Network.

and career and technical education, small businesses can partner with these local workforce development initiatives to set up a pipeline of skilled workers with autism.

As part of the local and regional economy, small businesses provide an array of career pathways for individuals with autism. What the small business community must do as a whole is better understand its role in this pipeline and provide increased work-based learning and employment opportunities for youth with autism so that greater numbers of students with autism can match their interests and skills with labor market demand and secure sustainable employment.

Benefits to Small Business

Autism Speaks believes the small businesses will benefit greatly from employing individuals with autism. Increasing the opportunities for individuals with autism to find sustainable employment is more than a social imperative; doing so also yields economic gain for businesses.

Employers can benefit by retaining valuable employees, improving productivity and morale, reducing workers' compensation and training costs, and diversifying their workforce. Employers have found workers with autism to be their most loyal, dedicated, and reliable employees, maintaining consistent hours worked per week for significant periods of time.¹⁸ Businesses also report that while on the job, employees with autism show engagement substantially higher than employees without disabilities, leading to increased productivity.¹⁹ Hiring individuals on the spectrum can also teach companies how to better identify with a growing customer base personally impacted by autism.

Autism Speaks believes the small business community is well-suited to spread awareness of the autism community as an underutilized source of high-quality employees. Awareness about the benefits of hiring individuals with autism and the low cost of providing accommodations must be increased. This Committee, business associations, local chambers of commerce, local industry associations, and other employer networks are in a powerful position to help other small businesses learn about best practices and take steps toward hiring qualified individuals with autism.

Nationally, Autism Speaks and other organizations are working hard to raise awareness within the broader business community about the abilities of people with autism. As businesses of all sizes and from all industries begin to recognize that hiring employees with autism is a cost-effective way to build a diverse and inclusive workforce, real-world testimonials from small businesses will be increasingly important for spreading awareness.

Small businesses are ideally positioned to share their real-world experience with other members of the business community, not just in hiring employees on the spectrum but also in successfully retaining employees with autism.

¹⁸ Schaller J., & Yang N. (2005). Competitive Employment for People with Autism: Correlates of Successful Closure in Competitive and Supported Employment. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, 49(1), 4-16.

¹⁹ BlueStarRecyclers. (2018, May). A 100% solution. *BlueStarRecyclers*. Retrieved from bluestarrecyclers.org/solution.htm

Benefiting the Community

Employing individuals with autism yields considerable economic and social advantages, simultaneously reducing the support costs for this population.²⁰ Estimated lifetime costs for supporting an adult with autism range from \$1.4 million to \$2.4 million in the U.S., and the degree to which adults with autism fail to achieve independence contributes to increased lifetime care costs.²¹ Research shows that employing individuals with autism, including those who may need substantial job supports saves taxpayer money by reducing the number of benefits that people with autism need when they are unemployed.²² In addition, employing individuals with autism alleviates some of the pressure on the overburdened adult service system; when employment supplants traditional adult day supports, society can achieve greater cost efficiency in these programs.²³

Recommendations

Numerous existing policies impact the employment of individuals with autism, some working to advance it, others to impede. Many do both. Consultation, collaboration and sharing of community resources can certainly help businesses and communities create more job opportunities, but we must also consider other systemic improvements. Autism Speaks wishes to make three systemic recommendations to improve employment outcomes for individuals on the spectrum:

Our first recommendation is to improve transition services in schools. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires that schools create a transition plan starting no later than age 16 for all students with individualized education plans. For this provision to work as intended, transition plans must include coordination across vocational rehabilitation, special education and career services. Schools must also work with community employers to help match students with available jobs in the local market. The onus does not fall on any one entity – success requires a concerted effort from everyone, and that effort must come as early as possible to maximize the benefit to students.

Our second recommendation is to improve coordination between federal government service providers. In its 2017 Report to Congress entitled *Young Adults and Transitioning Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder*, required by the Autism CARES Act, the Department of Health and Human Services called for “better coordination across federal agencies, and across service systems at the state and community levels...to adequately meet the diverse needs of the heterogeneous population of transitioning youth and young adults with ASD.”²⁴ Autism Speaks agrees that increased alignment between different entities serving transition-age youth with autism will result in more seamless service delivery for families and improve employment outcomes for adults.

Our third recommendation is to ensure that state-level implementation of workforce programs – including WIOA and HCBS – results in meaningful improvements for individuals with autism. When

²⁰ Jacob, A., Scott, M., Falkmer, M., & Falkmer, T. (2015). The Costs and Benefits of Employing an Adult with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Systematic Review. *PLoS ONE*, 10(10): e0139896. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0139896>.

²¹ Buescher, A., Cidav, Z., Knapp, M., & Mandell, D. (2014). Costs of Autism Spectrum Disorders in the United Kingdom and the United States. *JAMA Pediatr.* 168(8), 721-8.

²² Jacob, et al.

²³ Winsor, et al.

²⁴ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2017, October). *Report to Congress: Young Adults and Transitioning Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder*. Retrieved from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services website: <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/2017AutismReport.pdf>

Congress passed WIOA in 2014, it included provisions designed specifically to improve employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities. These pre-employment transition services provide a substantive framework for supporting individualized planning and training based on skill level and prioritize work-based learning. States are also working to expand access to HCBS and improve those services to emphasize paid work in the community. These efforts are important, and stakeholders must work together to ensure implementation produces positive outcomes for individuals on the spectrum.

Conclusion

Employment is more than the key to independence; our jobs are, in large part, the way we as Americans define ourselves. Individuals with autism share the same right to shape their identities and deserve the same opportunity to maximize their potential and to contribute as full and productive members of society. Small businesses today have a tremendous opportunity to help them do so, improving their bottom line and benefiting their communities at the same time.

Autism Speaks remains dedicated to serve as a conduit between individuals with autism and the small business community, and we look forward to strengthening that partnership today and into the future.

Testimony to House Committee on Small Business

“Ready, Willing, and Able to Work: How Small Businesses
Empower People with Developmental Disabilities.”

By: David Friedman, Founder/CEO, AutonomyWorks

May 9, 2018



Introduction:

Chairman Chabot, Ranking Member Velázquez and members of the Committee on Small Business, thank you for inviting me to this hearing and providing the opportunity to tell my story about “How Small Businesses Empower People with Developmental Disabilities.”

I am David Friedman. I have spent the better part of the last thirty-five years working in consumer marketing. I have had the good fortune to work for exceptional organizations, such as Accenture, Microsoft, and Publicis. Just over five years ago, I founded AutonomyWorks, a small business located outside of Chicago.

My professional career has little to do with why I am sitting in front of you today. I am here because of my son, Matthew. Matthew is now 22 years old. Like many 22-year-olds, Matthew is a sports fan – avidly following the Bears, Sox, and Bulls. He runs, plays in a basketball league, and loves his electronic devices.

Unlike most other 22-year-old men, Matthew has autism. Matthew has a lot of skills. He is exceptional with numbers and is a strong visual learner. That said, Matthew’s autism presents him with real challenges. He has challenges with organization and planning and he struggles to succeed in even the simplest social situations.

Matthew attended our local public schools. When students with disabilities reach 14 ½ years old, the school system begins a process called Transition Planning – setting in motion an effort to transition young adults into the “real” world of work or college. At the time, we felt that Matthew was unlikely to be successful in a traditional college. His lack of organizational and social skills required were too much of a barrier.

The team from the school, my wife and I began looking for alternatives – jobs and careers where Matthew could contribute and succeed. We were stunned by what we found. There were very few jobs available to people with disabilities. The ones that existed were low skill and did not leverage his unique skills and talents.

Matthew is not alone

The Problem:

Over 3 million Americans are living on the autism spectrum. It is the fastest-growing disability in the country, doubling in the past 15 years.¹ Autism, or autism spectrum disorder (ASD), refers

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2016, April 1). *Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)*. Retrieved from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention web site: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html>

to a range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech and nonverbal communication, as well as by unique strengths and differences. There is not one autism but many types, caused by different combinations of genetic and environmental influences.²

Since the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was passed in 1990, schools systems have made great progress in the availability and effectiveness of interventions and support for students with autism and other disabilities. Eventually, young adults with autism graduate from school systems into the world of work. Approximately, 50,000 individuals with autism spectrum disorder turn 18 each year in the United States.³

The work place is largely unprepared for this wave of workers. Despite their talents, there is a profound shortage of jobs for people with disabilities. Only 20.9% of people with disabilities are in the labor force – compared to 68.3% of people without disabilities. People with autism have the lowest employment rate of any category of disabilities.⁴ Based on current statistics, 80% of people with autism will be unemployed or underemployed as adults.

A recent study found that only half (53%) of young adults with an autism spectrum disorder had ever worked for pay outside the home in the first 8 years following high school. This is the lowest rate among disability groups even when controlling for impairment severity, household income, and social demographics. Only 34% were employed at the time of the survey interview. One in five worked full-time with average earnings of \$8.10/hour, significantly lower than disability comparison groups.⁵

For most, the employment gap is not the result of technical or functional capability. Many people with autism possess skills that are valuable for today's economy. Often, they possess intense focus, comfort with numbers and process, and a passion for repetitive, process-intensive tasks.

However, people with autism often have challenges that make it difficult to manage the complex interpersonal interactions present in most workplaces. Businesses – large and small – lack the knowledge and experience required to hire and manage this hidden workforce.

² Autism Speaks. (2018, May 4). What is Autism? Retrieved from Autism Speaks web site: <https://www.autismspeaks.org/what-autism>

³ Autism Speaks. (2016, December 12). *Mounting Evidence of Critical Need for Adult Transition Support*. Retrieved from Autism Speaks: <https://www.autismspeaks.org/science/science-news/top-ten-lists/2012/mounting-evidence-critical-need-adult-transition-support>

⁴ United States Department of Labor Office of Disability Employment Policy. (2018, April). *April 2018 Disability Employment Statistics. Ages 16 and over*. Retrieved from United States Department of Labor. <https://www.dol.gov/odep>

⁵ Shattuck. (2013, September 16). *Study confirms low rates of employment for young autistic adults*. Retrieved from Medical News: <http://www.news-medical.net/news/20130906/Study-confirms-low-rates-of-employment-for-young-autistic-adults.aspx>

Job training and placement services have attempted to address this problem. People with autism typically learn best through hands-on experience with real-time feedback. Unfortunately, most existing programs fail to transition participants into sustainable jobs and careers. In addition, shortages of public and private funding have limited their ability to scale.

People with autism want to work. This lack of job opportunities severely limits the ability of many adults with autism to support themselves and live independently. Nearly two-thirds (63.9%) of young adults with autism receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits.⁶ While each individual requires different types and amounts of support, it is estimated to cost as much as \$2.4 million to support a single individual with autism throughout their life. The total annual cost of supporting this population is over \$260 billion per year.⁷

AutonomyWorks Solution:

My wife and I were shocked to discover the magnitude of the gap between the desire and talents of people with autism and the workplace. We knew that our son and many others had the skills to contribute. Companies just needed to understand the potential and possibilities. In 2012, I left my corporate career and founded AutonomyWorks.

AutonomyWorks is a for-profit, commercial business. We have been operating for five years and serve more than fifteen commercial clients. Each week, our team of nearly thirty Associates with autism delivers hundreds of discrete tasks for our clients – at exceptional levels of quality.

AutonomyWorks was established to breakdown the barrier between potential and reality by creating thousands of jobs for adults with autism. We leverage the talents of people with autism – attention to detail, focus through repetitive tasks, and dedication to quality – to provide our clients with essential services. Our team frees companies from the burden of repetitive processing work so they can focus more time and attention on strategy and results.

AutonomyWorks creates jobs for unemployed and underemployed people with autism. Without their jobs at AutonomyWorks, most of these individuals would be relying on public assistance or the support of their families. Working at AutonomyWorks enables them to earn income while building skills applicable to many other jobs.

AutonomyWorks has created a business system to enable adults with autism. We restructure and reengineer client work to create tasks and jobs well-suited for our Associates. We provide a custom-tailored working environment optimally suited to their capabilities and needs.

⁶ United States Department of Health and Human Services. (2017, October). *Report to Congress: Young Adults and Transitioning Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder*. Retrieved from the Health and Human Services website. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/2017AutismReport.pdf>

⁷ Buescher, A. e. (2014, August). *Costs of autism spectrum disorders in the United Kingdom and the United States*. Retrieved from PubMed: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24911948>

Associates receive training, occupational support, and job coaching. We track performance and identify opportunities for additional training, expanded responsibility, and intrinsic and financial rewards.

AutonomyWorks is based outside Chicago in DuPage county. Our employees live across the Chicago area – commuting from as long as 90 minutes each way to their jobs.

AutonomyWorks partners closely with government agencies, school systems, and local service providers to coordinate and amplify our impact. For example, AutonomyWorks is part of a three-way collaboration with the Illinois Division for Rehabilitation Services (DRS) and the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) to develop information technology jobs for adults with disabilities in the Chicago area.

AutonomyWorks has been fortunate to participate in several Federally supported programs. For example, we recently completed a 24-month grant funded through the United States Department of Labor’s Employment and Training Administration (ETA) and the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP).⁸ With this support, AutonomyWorks hired 10 people and offered internships, apprenticeships, and training to an additional 54.

Specific Benefits:

AutonomyWorks was built from the start to employ adults with autism. It is the core of our mission and purpose. Every management decision is made with a focus on that objective.

Since our founding, AutonomyWorks has generated more than 70,000 hours of paid employment for adults with autism. Currently, we employ more than 30 people – most in their first paid job. Over 70% of employees are adults with autism. More than 100 times a week, an adult with autism goes to work at AutonomyWorks.

By the end of 2020, AutonomyWorks anticipates employing more than 100 people. By transitioning people from unemployment to work, AutonomyWorks hopes to reduce Medicaid and Social Security costs. As importantly, Associates will be building self-esteem and income while also developing workplace, financial management, and executive functioning skills.

AutonomyWorks has seen the challenge, the potential and the transformation among our Associates. Aaron and Jason are just two examples (note: names are changed to protect their privacy).

⁸ US Department of Labor. (2014, May 27). *Disability Employment Initiative Grants*. Retrieved from Department of Labor web site: https://dei.workforcegps.org/-/media/WorkforceGPS/disability/Files/DEISGARound5_DFA-PY-13-11_052714.ashx

Aaron: After graduating from high school, Aaron spent three years looking for a job. He applied for dozens of open positions and received rejection after rejection from these employers. He was discouraged and demoralized. In 2015, Aaron learned about AutonomyWorks through our partnership with the Division of Rehabilitation Services.

Aaron has been employed at AutonomyWorks for almost two years now. He works five days each week performing technical, detail orientated, computer work for our clients at an exceptional level of quality. Aaron utilizes public transportation and feels that he has finally found a place where he can contribute his skills and talents to the workplace.

Jason: Jason has a Bachelor's Degree from a four-year accredited university. For seven years, prior to joining to AutonomyWorks team, Jason found himself stuck, bagging groceries for a few hours each week at a local grocery store. Jason was discouraged with his employment situation – he wanted a job that took advantage of his education and his unique skills and abilities. Jason connected with his vocational rehabilitation counselor and learned about AutonomyWorks.

Jason has been employed by AutonomyWorks for over four years now and uses his communications degree to do digital marketing tasks for our clients. Jason feels that he is well suited for the work he does because of his high level of attention to detail. He has gained confidence, built friendships, and is saving his paychecks to purchase a new car.

As a father, I have seen the transformation first-hand with my son. Immediately after graduating, Matthew often looked back to the safety and support of high school and his transition program. Work has given Matthew a new purpose. He has mastered public transportation. He is attending the local community college. He is learning new skills. He is preparing to live independently.

Matthew is building a life.

Action:

There is much more to be done. In the next decade, the workplace will be flooded with over half million adults with autism – talented and eager to work. Small businesses generate a large percentage of new jobs across the United States. Small businesses must be a core part of any solution to the employment challenges facing adults with disabilities.

Small businesses working to address this challenge need your help. Through your actions and support, this Committee has a direct impact on the ability of AutonomyWorks and similar companies to grow and address this wave of workers.

Expand 8(a) Business Development Program:

The Committee on Small Business Subcommittee on Contracting and Workforce manages a range of programs that enhance participation of small businesses in providing goods and services to the federal government. Unfortunately, today's contracting programs exclude many organizations employing people with developmental disabilities.

Participation in the 8(a) Business Development Program is based on the attributes of the business owner. Many people with developmental disabilities that meet the requirements of the programs lack the skills and experience to establish and manage the operations of the business.

We ask that the Committee consider changing the 8(a) Business Development Program or adding an additional category to include companies employing people with developmental disabilities. Participation in the program should be based on employment outcomes rather than owner characteristics.

Support Small Business Apprenticeship Programs:

Apprenticeship programs are a proven approach for transitioning people with disabilities into employment. Many people with disabilities learn best through hands-on training. In addition, apprenticeships provide people with disabilities the opportunity to demonstrate their talents on the job.

The recently implemented Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) supports apprenticeships as a tool for workforce development. The scale of small businesses can make it challenging to develop and operate an apprenticeship program. We encourage this Committee to explore and support targeted initiatives that enable small businesses to build these programs collaboratively. For example, ...

- Create targeted technical assistance programs that encourage small businesses to build collaborative apprenticeship programs through consortium models or intermediaries.
- Establish tax credits that help small businesses embrace apprenticeships as part of their employee development strategy.

Closing:

Chairman Chabot, Ranking Member Velázquez and members of the Committee, thank you for allowing me to share my story and, more importantly, the skills and talents of AutonomyWorks Associates. I look forward to your questions.



**STATEMENT OF JOHN CRONIN
BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON SMALL BUSINESS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
READY, WILLING, AND ABLE TO WORK: HOW SMALL BUSINESSES EMPOWER PEOPLE WITH
DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES
MAY 9, 2018**

Good morning, Chairman Chabot, Ranking Member Velázquez and Members of the Small Business Committee. My name is John Cronin, and I am the co-founder and Chief Happiness Officer of John's Crazy Socks, based in Melville, New York. Thank you for inviting me to be here today as a representative and self-advocate of the National Down Syndrome Society, the leading human rights organization for all individuals with Down syndrome. I look forward to sharing my perspective as an entrepreneur and a voice for differently-abled small business owners everywhere.

I have Down syndrome, but Down syndrome never holds me back. I am 22-years old and work hard every day to show the world that individuals with Down syndrome are ready, willing and able to work. Give us a chance and we can be successful.

I founded this business with my dad, Mark. It was my idea and I came up with the name. We have a mission to spread happiness. We work to show what is possible. I love my business.

Let my dad and I tell you about our business.

The Story of John's Crazy Socks

Our story begins in the fall of 2016. John was in his last year of high school and, like everyone else, trying to determine what he would do after school. John had been preparing his whole life for that opportunity. As a child, like many people born with Down syndrome, John faced serious medical issues at birth. He had intestinal by-pass surgery on day three of his life and open-heart surgery before he was three months old. Excellent medical care made him healthy. He received an excellent education through the Huntington Public Schools. John already had two jobs, one working in the kitchen at a day camp, and the other working in an office with his mom and dad.

John was ready to work yet so many of the options offered John anything but work. There were job training programs and sheltered workshops. John wanted to do meaningful work. As John says, "I did not need more school. I did not need more training. I wanted a good job like my brothers Patrick and Jamie."

He found a solution when John told his dad, "I want to go into business with you." Given John's drive, John could not be stopped. So, we had to come up with an idea for the business. John suggested a few businesses, like a food truck. Unfortunately, as John explains, he can't cook, so that idea would not work.

Then John had his eureka moment, "We should sell socks."

John has worn crazy socks his entire life. "I love socks. They are colorful, creative and fun and they let me be me." John had the name and even some drawings of a website.

We opened on December 9, 2016, to see if John's Crazy Socks would work. Most of our initial orders came from our hometown – Huntington, New York. John made hand-deliveries, putting candy and a thank you note in every package. We found early success and decided to plunge headfirst into making the business work.

A Business Built on Happiness and Showing What is Possible

We have a simple mission at John's Crazy Socks: spreading happiness. And we built the business on four pillars:

Inspiration and Hope: Every day, we show what is possible when you give people a chance. We have built our business by showing that people with intellectual disabilities are an asset, not a liability, and they can make a business successful. John is the face of our business. We hire people with disabilities. We show what people can do through our videos. We host school tours and schoolwork groups. We focus on what people can do, not what they cannot do.

Giving Back: We pledged five percent of our profits to the Special Olympics because John is a Special Olympics athlete. We sell charity and awareness socks that raise money for our charity partners like the National Down Syndrome Society, Autism Speaks and the William Syndrome Association. John designed the world's first Down Syndrome Awareness Socks and his latest design is our Down Syndrome Super Hero Sock.

Socks You Can Love: We are a sock store, so we offer 1,900 different socks. We have a Sock-of-the-Month Club, gift boxes and gift bags. We must compete with businesses like Wal-Mart and Amazon, so we do same-day shipping.

Making It Personal: We make a connection with our customers. Every package receives a thank you note and from John and some candy.

We are a social enterprise with both a social and e-commerce mission that is indivisible. Without the social mission, we would be just another sock store. Without a solid e-commerce business, we would be nothing more than a cute story.

What happens when you let a young man with Down syndrome start a business and you put people with intellectual disabilities at the core of the business? Today, we are a year and a half old and here is what we have achieved so far:

- We have created 33 jobs with 15 of them held by people with differing abilities.

- We have raised over \$100,000 for our charity partners.
- Our videos are created to show what is possible, and have been seen over 4 million times and videos about our business by the BBC, the Mighty, Money magazine and others have been seen over 70 million times.
- We have over 5,500 online reviews and 96 percent of them are five-star reviews.
- We have shipped to every state and 44 different countries.
- We have shipped over 98,000 orders and earned \$3.6 million in revenue.

Every day, we show what is possible when you give people an opportunity. Our business succeeds because of the people we hire and because people respond when they see what we can achieve.

We continue to build on this foundation and work with other self-advocates. We have a collaboration with Colletty's Cookies out of Boston. Collette is a self-advocate with Down syndrome who owns her own cookie company and we include her products in our gift boxes. We help support Brittany's Baskets of Hope, a non-profit founded by Brittany Schiavone who has Down syndrome. They supply gift baskets to families who have a newborn with Down syndrome. In fact, Brittany works with us two days a week as a Sock Wrangler. We'd love to do something with our friends at Blake's Snow Shack, owned by another self-advocate with Down syndrome, Blake Pyron in Sanger, Texas, but we can't figure out yet how to put snow cones in our boxes.

We are starting to build the John's Crazy Socks Network that will feature regular shows hosted by or featuring differently-abled people. Nothing too serious, we want to have fun and spread happiness. We already did a football pick show last year and we may do a cooking show with one of our Sock Wranglers, Riley Melo. We want to find more ways to break stereotypes and show what people can do.

John's Crazy Socks - A Model for Competitive, Integrated Employment in the Disability Community

At John's Crazy Socks, we have created a unified workplace where people with disabilities and without work side by side. The result? Better productivity, better morale and higher retention. We focus on what people can do and not what they cannot do. We match job skills with our job needs. Everyone in our employ has earned his or her job.

One of the many things that make us different is our hiring process, especially for our crucial "sock wrangler" positions. We start the hiring process with less of an interview and more of a conversation. We want to make sure that anyone we hire is passionate about socks, the job and the work we do at John's Crazy Socks. We want everyone to buy into our mission and our culture. Next, potential employees shadow one of our sock wranglers, so they learn how to fill orders. Then, we test their knowledge and ask them to fulfill five orders within thirty minutes. For some, it takes them an hour to learn how to do this. For others, it takes weeks. We make sure to be patient and accommodating to any extra training they may need. The result of our hiring process is high productivity rates and a high retention rate. Our employees value us because we value them.

Once people join our team, we look for ways for them to take use their talents. Matt, who has Asperger's, is now writing sock descriptions for our website. Aliya is learning about social media from our Marketing Wizards and Brandon is learning Photoshop, so he can design socks.

In New York State, different regions have different minimum wages. On Long Island where our business is located, we have an \$11 an hour minimum wage. At John's Crazy Socks, our salaries start at \$12 an hour. We don't pay anyone below that. We told our workers, they do not do minimum work, so we will not pay them a minimum wage.

Additionally, full-time workers get health insurance, dental and vision insurance, life insurance and disability insurance. We are in the process of setting up a retirement program for them.

While we don't have traditional benefits for our part-time employees, like most businesses in the United States, we have other benefits to being a part-time employee of John's Crazy Socks. We have Bagel Wednesdays and Staff Lunch Fridays. We take everyone out to social events. This is especially important for our employees with differing abilities, as they get to socialize in an environment outside of work as well as learn how to act appropriately at a dinner. Last week, we took everyone to a dinner for our local Chamber of Commerce.

None of what we do is altruism; it's good business. We need the business to succeed. We are two guys from Long Island running a sock business. We have no special training. We have no government help. If we can do it, anyone can do it.

Congress Must Help Us End #LawSyndrome

Like many start ups, we have run into some tough obstacles and we have worked to overcome them. But there are some obstacles that we need you to help us change. All of our colleagues with different abilities work on a part-time basis. Why? Because if they work too many hours, they will lose their benefits. Just last week, Matt, who we mentioned, told us he would love to work 40-hours a week, but he can't, or he will lose his Medicaid and he can't afford to lose his Medicaid because of his health issues.

It is a terrible choice: work or benefits. It is not a choice we want anyone to have to make. We should encourage work and reward people who work more, not punish them.

John is a perfect example of this dilemma. John does not currently receive any government benefits, even though he is entitled to do so. But if he were to apply now, he would be rejected. Why? Because he started his own business. Yes, John would be forced to choose between equity in his business or benefits.

Our laws should encourage work. Our laws should encourage entrepreneurs. Yet our laws do the opposite. Matt, Aliya, Brandon and our other employees should not have to choose between work and benefits. They should not have to risk losing Medicaid, which they need to survive, just because they want meaningful work. That is why we are speaking here today, and this is why we are working with the National Down Syndrome Society.

While there are many people with Down syndrome that have the potential to own and lead a successful business like John or follow their own dreams and career aspirations, there are far too many obsolete laws that hold people with disabilities back. Last year, NDSS launched its End #LawSyndrome campaign, a national effort to spotlight those laws that hinder individuals with Down syndrome (and other disabilities) from fulfilling their aspirations. The path to end #LawSyndrome includes:

- Increasing income limitations and ending sub-minimum wage practices that discourage competitive employment opportunities;
- Creating a more portable Medicaid program with greater flexibility so that people with disabilities can work and live where they desire;
- Removing discriminatory provisions in the tax code that treat people with disabilities unfairly in employer-provided benefit programs; and
- Broadening the Achieve and Better Life Experience (ABLE) Act to allow more people with disabilities to accumulate assets and achieve economic self-sufficiency.

For John, a significant challenge was being forced to choose between Medicaid or having a meaningful career. It was a choice we could make. But for most people with Down syndrome and their families, it's a no-win proposition – lose the important Medicaid supports and services that enable them to attain and maintain gainful employment, or live in poverty.

It is time to decouple the poor from the disabled in our means-tested programs so that people with differing abilities can live with dignity.

Ending #LawSyndrome is about disability rights, and disability rights are human rights. The following are specific proposals that Congress can enact that will go a long way toward ending #LawSyndrome.

Pass the TIME Act

House Resolution 1377, the Transitioning to Integrated, Meaningful Employment (TIME) Act, a bipartisan bill led by Congressman Gregg Harper from Mississippi, would end the discriminatory practice of subminimum wage for people with disabilities. Subminimum wage is the practice of paying people with disabilities below the federal minimum wage, sometimes as little as \$0.30 an hour, simply because they have differing abilities. The TIME Act phases out this practice responsibly over a period of six years, a key recommendation from a 2012 report to the President by the National Council on Disability.¹

Awaiting consideration by the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, the bill has 30 cosponsors and will be introduced in the Senate shortly. The bill amends Section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards dating back to 1938. Yes, the year 1938, a time when people with disabilities like John were institutionalized.

There is no justification to allow this practice to continue. John proves every day that he is not defined by his disability. Our business demonstrates anyone can succeed and be profitable by

¹ https://www.ncd.gov/sites/default/files/NCD_Sub%20Wage_508.pdf.

hiring people with differing abilities and paying them a fair wage. There is no excuse to allow people to be paid less than minimum wage.

We encourage all the Members of this Committee to cosponsor the TIME Act today.

Create Employee Benefits Tax Fairness

Because of the asset limitations of SSI and Medicaid, employees with disabilities who are beneficiaries of these programs cannot accumulate assets in 401(k)s, Health Savings Accounts, and other employee savings programs. Many employers make contributions to these accounts and receive a tax deduction in return. To meet non-discrimination rules, all employees of a business must be eligible for the same benefits. However, an employer contribution to the account of a differently-abled employee must immediately be withdrawn to stay within the asset limitations. This means the employee is assessed a 10 percent penalty for the early withdrawal, and the plan provider is required to withhold 20 percent for federal income taxes and two percent to eight percent for state income taxes, depending upon state of residence.

To create a level playing field for differently-abled employees, Congress should provide employers with a tax deduction, and an exemption from the non-discrimination rules, for contributions made to an employee's ABLE Account in lieu of contributions to other employee savings programs. As you know, the assets in ABLE Accounts do not count when determining an individual's eligibility to receive, or the amount of, any assistance provided by a needs-based federal program. This would address the unfairness in the tax treatment of employee savings programs and create a greater incentive for employers to attract and retain differently-abled workers.

Reform Medicaid & Social Services to Incentivize Employment

Instead of discouraging employment, Medicaid should provide incentives to states that encourage employment for people with Down syndrome and other disabilities, and offer cost-effective supports and services that promote self-determination, independence, productivity, and integration and inclusion.

John doesn't receive any of the benefits to which he's entitled as a person with Down syndrome. John must choose between having equity in his own business and receiving Medicaid benefits. John couldn't have both. To receive Medicaid benefits, there are very restrictive limits on how much you can earn and how much you can have in assets. John is fortunate that he has a choice. But most people with Down syndrome can't take that risk because they have significant medical needs, and they often rely on the long-term supports and services that Medicaid provides to allow them to function on a daily basis and to become active and productive participants in their communities.

This problem affects people with disabilities across the board, not just business owners. Some of our own employees have to artificially limit their hours because if they work 40-hours a week, they lose their benefits.

We need to make this system work for people like John and so many others. Here are some ideas-

1. Raise income limitations for Medicaid beneficiaries with Down syndrome and other disabilities who are employed.
2. Create a new "title" in Medicaid that includes those with disabilities who exceed income limitations.
3. Expand existing Medicaid buy-in programs.
4. Establish a mandatory HCBS Waiver in every state Medicaid program. These crucial services that help people with disabilities work and be productive members of their communities are optional and can easily be taken away with budget cuts.

We want to offer our employees more work to enhance quality of life and, somewhat selfishly, to use their talents to enhance our business' competitiveness in the marketplace. However, because of the way Medicaid and SSI are currently set up, we can't. As a country, we are telling people who are ready, willing and able to work that they can't. We are telling them they are limited. We are telling them to accept the government's handout and stand down. We are telling them they can't achieve the dreams that so many in this room take for granted like independence or self-sufficiency. We are sentencing them to live in poverty. This is a systemic problem and an injustice that violates basic human rights.

Main Street to Wall Street – Businesses Need to Team Up with NDSS' #DSWORKS Employment Program

NDSS' #DSWORKS®, an employment program established by the National Down Syndrome Society in 2016, is encouraging corporations and businesses to invest in hiring people with Down syndrome and increase the number of opportunities for individuals with Down syndrome to work in meaningful and competitive employment settings.

The TIME Act will help pave the way for equality in the workplace for people with Down syndrome and other disabilities. By phasing out the special wage certificates, this legislation will give people with disabilities access to the work and training environments that will allow them to acquire meaningful skills and better employment opportunities. During the phase-out period, employers that currently hold special wage certificates would be required to conduct individual assessments of those who are paid below the wage and develop a plan to transition employees to more competitive integrated employment opportunities.

It's important to note that both political parties recognized the need to get rid of Section 14(c) in their party platforms during the last election. This is truly a bipartisan issue. It is not about increasing the minimum wage. It is about equal opportunity in the workplace and ending discrimination against differently-abled people.

If Section 14(c) is phased out, businesses large and small can fill that gap.

We are so happy that businesses from Wall Street to Main Street are hiring people with intellectual and physical disabilities. They are paying them a fair wage. They are providing them with benefits. They are treating them the way they would treat anyone else in their vast workforce. With respect.

In return, employers are benefitting from the value that people with Down syndrome bring to their organizations and to their bottom line. A 2014 study by McKinsey and Company found that companies that hire people with Down syndrome outperform their competitors and are able to sustain exceptional performance over time.² It found that individuals with Down syndrome have a better quality of life and opportunities for development, while the companies that employ them often report significant improvements in their “organizational health.”

We admire and are grateful to the amazing businesses that hire people with differing abilities. Why should we stop with just these businesses? We want employers across America to emulate these companies. We want all employers to stop paying their workers with disabilities a subminimum wage. As Members of Congress, we hope you want these things too.

As a business owner and an individual with Down syndrome, John deserves to be treated just like everyone else, not treated less than everyone else. John and others like him are ready, willing and able to work for a fair wage. We ask the members of this Committee to please support and cosponsor the TIME Act today to ensure we end this discriminatory practice.

We call on all businesses, big and small, to hire people with disabilities and to treat them with the same respect with which you treat your other employees. Let us show you the amazing things people with differing abilities can do. Give us a chance.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and committee members for your time and consideration of these important issues. We yield to questions.

² “The value that employees with Down Syndrome can add to organizations,” March 2014.

Testimony of

Lori Ireland
President, Ireland Family Foundation, NC
Founder, Extraordinary Ventures, NC

On behalf of

The Autism Society of America

Before the

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Small Business

Hearing on

***Ready, Willing, and Able to Work: How Small Businesses Empower People with
Developmental Disabilities***

May 9, 2018

Ireland
May 9, 2018
Page 1 of 5

My name is Lori Ireland. As noted, I am the elected Vice Chair of the Autism Society of America, testifying in my role as a founder of Extraordinary Ventures.

I want to thank Chairman Chabot, ranking member Nydia Velázquez and esteemed members of the Committee for allowing me this valuable opportunity to address the employment needs of adults who have an autism diagnosis.

Last week, the CDC announced the incidence of individuals diagnosed with autism is now 1 out of every 59 eight year olds, up from 1 in 68 when the CDC last reported the incidence number. While these numbers certainly require attention, there are additional statistics that need to be highlighted. An estimated 70 percent of adults with autism are either unemployed or underemployed, despite their ability, desire, and willingness to work in the community, and as many live on incomes below the poverty level. Each year, 50,000 additional individuals with autism are entering adulthood. Simply put, we are not providing or creating the job possibilities required to meet these numbers and as important, we are not providing the opportunity for so many to achieve the highest quality of life possible and full participation in American life.

Extraordinary Ventures (EV), formed in 2007, is a sustainable business model and one unique solution addressing this employment dilemma. With an operating budget of one million comprised of 80% business revenues and 20% private donations, and more than 50 tax-paying employees all of whom have disabilities, we are also a part of the local marketplace and economy.

We have accomplished this through old fashion American small business practices and four core philosophies:

One: We operate as a real business. Nothing works if we don't make quality products and services that the marketplace will buy, and in turn support us. We serve an important mission in our community and customers support that, but everything we do starts and ends with delivering competitive products and services. Without this, there would be no sales and then no jobs. That is the main distinction for EV over almost every other developmental disability enterprise that we run into that offers at least subminimum wages.

Ireland
May 9, 2018
Page 2 of 5

Two: We operate a portfolio of businesses. This model allows us to provide a variety of job options to the people we hire and the opportunity to find the right fit for each person. While a business will typically hire to fill a specific - set job, we are able to change or re-arrange operations and workplaces so that the work in front of our employees is a customized match for their capabilities and interests. We find the job to meet the person, not the other way around.

We currently operate 6 businesses:

- 1.) A pick-up and delivery laundry operation serving about 150 UNC college students, residential families and businesses in the community. We are priced competitively in the market and have a waitlist for new signups so the operation is primed for expansion if our employees can be provided consistency in support staff and a higher income cap.
- 2.) A bulk mailing operation where we send out 60,000 pieces of mail per month.
- 3.) EV Gifts where our employees create a premium line of handmade candles soaps, lip balms and other products sold online and in retail stores across the state.
- 4.) EV Pets dog walking business serving the local community.
- 5.) A bus detailing service which operates on a yearly contract with the town of Chapel Hill servicing a fleet of public transit vehicles.
- 6.) An event center where we rent out the surplus space in our building for parties, conferences, and meetings – This provides good cash flow that helps pay the rent and support the other businesses.

Three: Everyone is paid at least minimum wage. Our employees are paid fairly and held to the same standards and expectations as any other business. As people improve in their jobs, they grow into bigger roles and are compensated more. Currently our employees earn anywhere from minimum wage to \$15/hour.

Four: We serve the full range of adults on the autism spectrum. We are able to offer a wide variety of tasks within our businesses that in turn, best suit a wide variety of people. We employ people that live and work independently to those that are non-verbal, prone to severe behaviors and need 24/7 support -- These are the people that need your help.

Ireland
May 9, 2018
Page 3 of 5

In our experience, the difficulty is not in successfully employing someone with a disability, it is in attracting and keeping qualified employment support staff so they can grow in their jobs and expand their role and hours while facing a low income cap.

We are witness to the dramatic positive impact have a job has on our employees. We see the significant decrease in challenging behaviors, an increase in job skills, dexterity, communication, life skills, and confidence. There is no question that employment is beneficial and a worthy cause to fight for. We know that not everyone is able to work, but our goal is to provide training and opportunities for those that can and want to work. We should strive for the same labor force participation rate as those without disabilities. What we are trying to do is put the largest number of people in jobs that will still be around fifty years from now. It begins with setting these individuals up with opportunities allowing for growth and independence and continues with sustainable business practices.

There are also incredible benefits to employers and small businesses that come with the hiring of adults with autism. For example, employee retention. While we have a number of employees who gain the necessary skills and choose to leave and pursue full-time employment outside of Extraordinary Ventures, *which we applaud*, we also have employees hitting their 8, 9 and 10 year anniversaries almost every week. With millennials switching jobs about every two years, this should be a huge selling point to small businesses, especially when the ideal positions for adults with autism tend to be the ones with simpler, more repetitive tasks that typically have high turnover.

Extraordinary Ventures does not seek or rely upon government funds. We pay livable wages and are now generating 80% of our costs through product and service revenue and the remaining 20% from donations. While we are very proud of our work, I would be doing a disservice to our employees and their families if I did not use this opportunity to ask you to address several critical policy needs that we believe can expand and help our efforts. We know that in partnership with the Autism Society, we can expand our efforts but we need public policy changes.

Let me give you an example. One of our workers came to us who relied solely on Supplementary Social Security Income (SSI) for years. His SSI payment was around \$700 and that was all he had as income.

Ireland
May 9, 2018
Page 4 of 5

When the cost of a one bedroom apartment in Chapel Hill is around \$600, he couldn't afford to live as independently as possible since he had only \$100 for utilities, transportation and food each month. He received SSI when he was unable to work and after other agencies helped him, he was ready to work. He came to us and excelled at work. He was so proud of his first paycheck, but because of his disability, he could only work part time and his take home pay was around \$300 after taxes were subtracted. He then realized that due to SSI rules, his \$300 would result in losses of his SSI income. While certainly we want to help people off of government support whenever possible, the current approach isn't helping us do that. Our worker was only able to have a total of around \$850 which still would not allow him to move to economic self-sufficiency. And when you consider that apartment rentals often require security deposits, limitations on how much he could save under SSI rules limited such savings to less than \$2000.

On behalf of this individual and all of those facing the same problem, I would like to make some specific policy recommendations to address some of the challenges for individuals with autism and other disabilities who want to work but cannot risk the loss of health care and income supports:

- Increase the Substantial Gainful Activity (SGA) level at least to the level used for people who are blind.
- Substantially increase the resource limit for SSI and annually index for inflation.
- Enact simplification of work incentives, including allowing on-going presumptive re-entitlement to Title II disability benefits and on-going eligibility for Medicare for those who lose benefits due to work but continue to be disabled.
- Provide cash assistance outside of Social Security and SSI to assist working individuals with disabilities in meeting their disability-related costs, regardless of their income or assets.
- Enact technical and substantive changes to the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act to ensure the law works as intended.
- Protect the Affordable Care Act and provide incentives to states to expand Medicaid authorized by the law.
- Support the ABLE Act and bills to expand it.
- Protect the Medicaid program and provide incentives to states to implement the option to buy into Medicaid for people with disabilities who work.

Ireland
May 9, 2018
Page 5 of 5

- Reject work requirements being proposed for eligibility for Medicaid, SNAP, public housing. These new policy ideas will not help people find employment and will jeopardize their health and well-being.

Medicaid provides health care services and long-term services and supports that maintain the health, function, independence, and well-being of 10 million enrollees living with disabilities and, often, their families. For many people with disabilities, their lives literally depend on being able to access needed healthcare. Medicaid helps people stay healthy so that they go to work.

We also encourage you all to examine ways those of us in the non-profit world who hire individuals with a disability can benefit in a way similar to tax benefits paid to for-profits that hire groups that are chronically unemployed. We want to be able to encourage more entities to hire the most in need and challenged, who often have higher training and support costs.

Extraordinary Ventures hires more than 50 individuals. Imagine just one similar agency in every state and the District of Columbia hiring a total of 2550 people. We are a true small business. Our workers pay taxes and we provide needed community services and products. We provide opportunity to both individuals who have college degrees and those who require 24 hour assistance.

You all can help by creating the policies needed to accomplish this. I ask that you consult with experts such as the Autism Society of America and other stakeholders to help find reasonable, cost-effective ways to help make employment an opportunity that enables a person with a disability to be able to live the American Dream to the fullest extent that they are able.

I thank you for this opportunity to tell you about our work and our wish to expand employment options for every adult with autism.

Please feel free to contact me and our Vice President of Public Policy Kim Musheno for more information on our policy recommendations.

US House of Representatives: Committee on Small Business

Ready, Willing, and Able to Work: How Small Businesses Empower People with Developmental Disabilities

Hearing held on May 9, 2018

AutonomyWorks Response to Follow-up Questions

Submitted: June 27, 2018

1. Can you describe what types of small businesses particularly benefit from this workforce?

A wide variety of small businesses could benefit from hiring people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Many people with ASD excel at detail-oriented, process-intensive work where quality is essential. At AutonomyWorks, we have seen great performance on transaction processing, data processing, and quality assurance.

These talents are required by many businesses. In particular, almost all office-based businesses have functions where people with ASD could contribute. For example, ...

- Professional, scientific, and technical services (731,741 firms with 1-19 employees in 2013)
- Finance and insurance offices (216,130 firms)
- Educational services (67,144 firms)
- Information services (61,051 firms)¹

There are more than one million small businesses that fall into these categories. If a subset of these firms hired just one person with a disability, it could have a major benefit on thousands of lives.

AutonomyWorks is one of several firms that are working to create jobs for people with ASD. Other organizations have had success hiring people with autism to work in software testing, warehousing and logistics, and food service.

¹US Small Business Administration. (2016). *US Small Business Economic Profile*. Retrieved from US Small Business Administration web site: https://www.sba.gov/sites/default/files/advocacy/United_States.pdf



2. Are there certain tasks or job responsibilities that are well suited for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Just like neurotypical people, each person with ASD has a different set of skills and talents. That said, many share a consistent set of skills and talents. These talents are particularly relevant to specific roles and tasks.

- Transaction processing – Set-up, processing, and QA of complex operational transactions.
 - Order management
 - Financial transaction audits
 - Marketing operations
- Data management – Integration of data from multiple sources into coherent data sets. Report production and QA.
 - Financial analysis
 - Customer research
 - Marketing performance analysis
- Production support – High quality support of repetitive, process intensive tasks.
 - Logistics and warehousing
 - Quality assurance
 - Assembly (e.g. food service, manufacturing)

3. What steps can a local small business take to create a welcoming environment for these individuals?

With small amounts of preparation and a few accommodations, people with autism can be exceptional employees in many roles. For many people with autism, new experiences can be stressful and this anxiety can get in the way of job performance. Fortunately, with a few small efforts, small businesses can get great performance from their new employees.

- Ramp-up of responsibilities – Many people with autism have excellent task focus and attention to detail. Typically, they learn best when focused on one or two tasks at a time. As the employee masters tasks, they can continue to learn new tasks.
- Low-sensory work space – Some people with autism can be distracted by noise, light, and movement. A work space that minimizes outside sensory input is ideal to eliminate this distraction. For example, the best locations would be away from windows, walkways, or kitchens.
- Concrete expectations – People with autism are focused on quality and eager to perform at high levels. Typically, they work best with clear, concrete expectation, such as due date, quality expectation, and issue resolution.



Once the new employee is contributing fully, on-going management of employees with autism is very similar to the management of any other employee. They want clear direction and feedback so that they can contribute to the organization.

- Written directions – Often, people with autism work better with written instructions (instead of verbal). Written instructions enable the employee to verify accuracy and be sure that they are completing the task correctly.
- Unambiguous feedback – People with autism are eager to achieve and perform. They respond best to clear, direct feedback on performance (whether positive or negative).
- Managed change – People with autism require time to understand and learn new procedures, processes, and structures. With planning and explanation, they can successfully navigate most changes.

Most companies find that the total cost of accommodations is less than \$100. In many cases, these adjustments are beneficial for all employees – not just those with disabilities.

4. What more can Congress do to empower small businesses to hire individuals with developmental disabilities?

When a small business hires a person with a disability, it can transform life for that person and their family. A job builds confidence and self-esteem and begins a path to both financial and personal independence. For many, a job is the first step in building a full life.

For the small business, there are many advantages to hiring individuals with disabilities. Many small businesses find that people with disabilities are committed and productive employees. Often, turnover and absenteeism are much lower than the neurotypical workforce. In many cases, people with disabilities bring new perspectives and positive attitudes to the work environment.

The benefits extend beyond the single business and individual to the entire community. Often people with disabilities are dependent on government support programs (e.g. SSI, SSDI). By some estimates, it can cost as much as \$2.4 million to support a person with autism through their lifetime.² A job enables people to move from government support to become taxpayers.

Congress has several opportunities to support small business hiring of people with disabilities and the personal, company, and national benefits that accompany these jobs. Two specific actions would generate the greatest immediate impact.

² Buescher, A. e. (2014, August). *Costs of autism spectrum disorders in the United Kingdom and the United States*. Retrieved from PubMed: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24911948>



1. Expand 8(a) Business Development Program:

The Committee on Small Business Subcommittee on Contracting and Workforce manages a range of programs that enhance participation of small businesses in providing goods and services to the federal government. Unfortunately, today's contracting programs exclude many organizations employing people with developmental disabilities.

Participation in the 8(a) Business Development Program is based on the attributes of the business owner. Many people with developmental disabilities that meet the requirements of the programs lack the skills and experience to establish and manage the operations of the business.

We ask that the Committee consider changing the 8(a) Business Development Program or adding an additional category to include companies employing people with developmental disabilities. Participation in the program should be based on employment outcomes rather than owner characteristics.

2. Support Small Business Apprenticeship Programs:

Apprenticeship programs are a proven approach for transitioning people with disabilities into employment. Many people with disabilities learn best through hands-on training. In addition, apprenticeships provide people with disabilities the opportunity to demonstrate their talents on the job.

The recently implemented Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) supports apprenticeships as a tool for workforce development. The scale of small businesses can make it challenging to develop and operate an apprenticeship program.

We encourage this Committee to explore and support targeted initiatives that enable small businesses to build these programs collaboratively. For example, ...

- Create targeted technical assistance programs that encourage small businesses to build collaborative apprenticeship programs through consortium models or intermediaries.
- Establish tax credits that help small businesses embrace apprenticeships as part of their employee development strategy.



Rep. Adriano Espaillat (NY-13) Opening Statement
House Committee on Small Business Hearing on "Ready, Willing, and Able to Work: How Small
Businesses Empower People with Developmental Disabilities"
May 9, 2018

Opening Statement:

Good Morning. Thank you, Chairman Chabot and Ranking Member Velazquez, for holding this very important hearing on an unfortunately overlooked segment of the labor force; persons with developmental disabilities.

The disparity in employment among working age peoples with and without disability is astounding. Almost 74 percent participation of the non-disabled compared to almost 32 percent with disabilities. Such a large gap is shameful.

My staff and I had the great pleasure of meeting John Cronin and his father in my office earlier this year. John is an extraordinarily capable young man and that his business has found success due to John and the experience and perspective he lends.

Rep. Adriano Espaillat (NY-13) Opening Statement
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John knows and understands that the aid and help he has received is what he has chosen to provide his employees. This decision is one small way of closing the employment gap between persons with and without disabilities.

I am glad that we are having this hearing. We need to be more inclusionary of all people to grow and develop our labor force.

Chairman Chabot and Ranking Member Velazquez;

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today and bringing together such a distinguished panel of witnesses to share with us their experience and key perspective on these issues.

